

Piper, The Forger
by Allan Pinkerton

I THINK I can best relate the romantic history of this remarkable criminal by extracts from his confession to me, in the summer of 1876, shortly after his release from prison, and when it was hoped his professions of reform would prove all they then promised:

“I was born in Cynthiana Township, rear Paris, Kentucky, on the old Topper plantation, in 1828. My father was a gentleman in whom courtesy and courtliness were inborn graces. My earliest recollections are of this man, his wife, my mother (a brilliant French lady he had married in Europe), flowers, happy negroes, and countless lady and gentleman visitors. This picture passed away when I became five years of age and my mother died. Her death brought dark days to me, and the removal of our family to Brooklyn, where, after a few years, my father married a wealthy lady of that city, who was—well, what stepmothers usually are. She was not my mother, and besides, there were two crops of children, and they cannot very well be mixed like two grades of wheat in a Chicago elevator.

“My father was wealthy for those times, worth probably two hundred thousand dollars; and having no home in reality, I was not long in spoiling. My father was socially a favorite, and, as he took me almost everywhere with him, by the time I was fourteen years of age I was a regular pet of the lawyers, politicians, and literary men of his circle.

“Naturally precocious, and with no restraining home influences, I went to the devil at a rapid pace. My father was very desirous that I should have a fine education; and after I had gone through the Brooklyn public schools, I was prepared for college by tutors, and intended graduating from Yale, when a little incident occurred which changed the whole tenor of my life, and led to the circumstances that forced me into being what I have been.

““My father gave me four thousand dollars, and directed me to proceed to the Wyoming Valley, to invest the same in coal, provided it could be secured at certain rates. I got as far as Philadelphia, went on a spree there, and finally went to New Orleans, where I spent every dollar before my father discovered my whereabouts.

“It almost broke his heart, as I was the man’s pride. He never reprimanded me; but I could see that it bowed him down, and, though he was always tender and considerate, had built a wall between us.

“I pursued my studies about a year after this, and then, getting hold of a few hundred dollars, went to Buffalo, not exactly as a run-away, but with a coldness that made that separation from my father a final one. I had some good letters of introduction, and several Buffalo business men knew of my family’s wealth and standing, and, as I never had any bad habits, I made friends there rapidly.

“I shortly made the acquaintance of a firm named Rathburn, Pettis & Co., the senior member of which was convicted of forging grain receipts, and was sentenced to ten years at Auburn, but was pardoned out several years before the expiration of his term, and subsequently toon up all the

paper which had taken him down, dying a few years since worth fully a hundred thousand dollars.

“Rathburn seemed greatly interested in me, and, through the firm’s influence, I became steward of the old ‘Superior,’ a steamer then plying between Buffalo and Chicago, ran two trips as such, and was then promoted to the assistant clerkship, which position I retained until the close of navigation. In the meantime I had become one of Rathburn’s family, and they seemed to love me as a son. They lived on what was then known as Dousman Street, an aristocratic locality, with people like Dean Richmond for neighbors. Rathburn’s family were very extravagant, which ruined him. He had often remarked on my wonderful penmanship—not that it was so beautiful, but on account of its being so varied and done with such fluency.

“One winter evening—it was Sunday evening, and a dreary one—he came to me in their parlor, where his two beautiful daughters and myself were sitting reading, and said: ‘My son’—he always called me ‘my son’—‘step into the library a moment; I want to speak with you.’ I saw there was *something* wrong, but followed him in; and he motioned me to a seat in front of his secretary, where there were writing materials, evidently just laid there. He walked the floor for a little time, and then came to where I was sitting, and began, in a rattling, gasping sort of a way, complimenting my hand-writing, praising my good qualities, bemoaning his family’s extravagance, and requesting me to see if I could write certain names attached to different papers as well as they were written upon them—all in a piteous, half-crazed manner, which scared me. He explained that no harm could come of it; that he could more than meet all of his obligations if given but a chance to turn; and concluded by reminding me that I would permit his ruin if I did not or could not do as he wished by the next morning.

“I got all worked up about it, and told him that I could not write my own name that night, but that I would go right to bed, have a good sleep, get up early in the morning, and if he would then show me what he wanted I would try and do it for him. This made the man so happy and bright, that I went to bed happy too, and got up at six o’clock, and went into the library, where I found everything ready. I worked steadily for an hour under his directions, and at the end of that time he was half wild with delight—the possessor of thirty thousand dollars’ worth of grain receipts, that were good as genuine, to realize upon. He grasped me by the hand, and, with tears of joy and gratitude streaming down his face, said, hysterically, that I had saved him, and that a two thousand dollar span and carriage he owned should be my reward.

“I did not then realize the enormity of my crime, and I believe that, had I not known that man, and unconsciously fallen before that terrible temptation, I never would have been what I have; but that turn-out, the man’s gratitude and manifest kindnesses, his wife’s redoubled attention, his two daughters’ extreme affection, everything that will whirl the head of a foolish boy and give him the first devilish taste of power, crazed me, ruined me!

“The first grain receipts thrown upon the markets were of course retired as fast as they became due and substituted by new ones, but the overplus became so great after a few months that the inevitable had to come. Rathburn was arrested, tried—ex-President Fillmore being his counsel—convicted, and sentenced to Auburn for ten years, there being a general and powerful feeling that the whole thing was a conspiracy of his partners for his ruin. When the lightning struck, his wife

came to me with a thousand dollars and begged me, in heaven's name, to fly the country; which, after disposing of my turn-out, I did. But not until I had put the Atlantic Ocean between me and the United States did I realize that I was a fugitive in a strange land, and a man without a country.

“But once in Europe, and the necessity for some scheme for money goading me on, the terribly unfortunate power I held, coupled with a good education, quick wits, and a boundless self-reliance, made my subsequent career as a criminal a natural sequence.

“My next operation was in purchasing four bills of exchange for eight pounds—each the smallest bills then purchasable in England—from a Liverpool bank upon a Paris house; and I “raised” them, realizing twelve thousand dollars out of the operation. Being of a literary turn of mind and a good scholar, I then went to Heidelberg, Germany, with a view of entering the university there and becoming a thorough German scholar; but after a little time got restless, and returned to London, where I secured an attorney, who settled the Paris matter and took up the paper for me, accomplishing the whole for less than two thousand dollars.

“I was only a few months in Europe, when I returned to America; and after wandering about for a little time—though always studying banking and commercial rules and customs with the zeal of an honest capitalist, I went to Philadelphia, and purchased, at a bank there, five certificates of deposit—one for five thousand dollars and the other four for fifty dollars each. With these in my pocket, and about six thousand dollars in ready money besides, I sailed from Baltimore to Charleston, S. C., and represented myself as a wealthy Englishman traveling for his health and seeking profitable American investments, made acquaintance at the banks, where I was informed of terms of discount for cashing my five thousand dollar certificate—claiming to be in no great haste, and giving them plenty of time to ascertain by mail that my certificate of deposit was no myth. Then I raised the four fifty dollar certificates to five thousand dollar certificates, leisurely called around at the four different banks, and got them cashed, transferred the *genuine* to a wealthy friend, securing the cash for the same, and, long before my Charleston friends could secure advices from Philadelphia, I was well on my way to Cuba, with an additional fund of twenty thousand dollars. I made it an invariable rule to “settle” these little matters up clean as I went along, and doing so in this instance only cost me four thousand dollars.

“I could do nothing in my line in Cuba. There are no enterprising business men there. They want to know all about a man.

They insist on knowing that a man *has* been honest, as well as that he seems so, and has money. I soon left that country; and, while crossing to New Orleans, developed a scheme to relieve that city of about fifty thousand dollars, which failed. A foolish momentary fondness for a brilliant New Orleans adventuress caused this plan to fail, as I felt satisfied that she had learned too much of my methods, and would levy on me heavily for silence, or expose me outright. I left Cuba with some little Spanish paper, which I intended to expand sufficiently to enable me to purchase about sixty thousand dollars' worth of cotton, make a *bona-fide* purchase of that amount with the inflated paper, ship it to Liverpool, and draw against the shipment for fifty thousand dollars, and then draw out of the cotton trade.

“I went to Cleveland from New Orleans, and at Berea I married. I had about twenty-five thousand dollars, and I began husbanding it as carefully as though I had earned every cent of it by hard labor. From Ohio I went to Rochester, New York, and there opened a large Yankee notion and furnishing-goods store, and started peddling wagons into the country. I did well; sold out well; and went to Albion, New York, and there engaged in the stove business, inaugurating, I believe, the system of stove-peddling, which afterward became general throughout the State, in which business I had twelve wagons engaged.

“Everything I touched seemed to turn as if by magic into money. About 1850 I came back into Ohio, and purchased several mills; and in 1852 removed to Iowa, where, as I had taken fully one hundred thousand dollars, I soon became one of the leading capitalists of the State, and in five years had come to be worth fully half a million. I was considered worth a million, and ranked financially next to Cook & Seargant, the well-known Davenport bankers. In fact, I was one of *the* very few solid men of Iowa, and my paper was as good as the gold at any bank in the State. I felt guilty and restless all this time, and could find no pleasure save in incessant work. I built an eighty thousand dollar residence, and one of my enterprises was building, with old Anton Marat, the City Hotel of St. Louis, once a fine house, with the extensive sale-stables attached; and in Iowa I was in every enterprise that I could learn of. I made an immense amount of money in a very short time; but my financial ruin came from [endorsing] the paper of everybody who would ask it.

“Everything was swept away in the crash of ‘57, save four thousand dollars, which I had deposited with Budd & Baldwin, bankers, at Clinton. With this I left the State, and went to Chicago, where for a time I bought wheat on the street for a firm named Radcliffe & Walker; but at that time everybody was poor, scared, and running away; and the old fascination of the criminal’s life coming over me, I left Chicago with five hundred dollars of what remained of this four thousand dollars, in one dollar bills, and the balance in gold, and went to Fremont, Ohio. Making a great show of this, I deliberately determined on swindling somebody, and soon found that a spendthrift Frenchman, one Falquet, who had made the wife of the Sandusky, Ohio, postmaster his mistress, was going to the dogs financially, and who I at once saw was the proper party for a victim. The result was, I went to New York, and purchased, for one hundred dollars, ten thousand dollars’ worth of the then absolutely worthless Pennsylvania Coal Company’s bonds. My next step was to get about two hundred copies of Thompson’s Stock Reporter, one hundred of two years previous, and one hundred then current, transfer the covers, and slip them into their places where they were taken. Pennsylvania Coal Company’s bonds suddenly went up from nothing to above par, and with twenty thousand dollars’ worth of them and three hundred dollars in gold, I became the *bona-fide* purchaser of Falquet’s business, making a cool twenty thousand, and sending him and his mistress on to New York in a most happy frame of mind. Of course I was arrested for fraud, but no fraud could be shown; and, after honorably conducting the business for some time, I sold out, and became a desperately dangerous forger.

“In 1862 I made arrangements with the chiefs of police of a dozen large cities, by which I was to receive protection for a certain percentage of my plunder. They were not only to act as a ‘fence’ for the money or bonds I might secure, but act as ‘go-betweens’ for the purpose of effecting settlements with parties whom I had swindled. If I was too closely pressed, I was to be arrested on some 1 trivial charge and protected in jail, or given an opportunity to get straw bail and

escape. Under this protection, which for several years was absolute, my first operation was in Wisconsin, the next in Minnesota, next in Iowa, then in Illinois, next in Ohio, then in Pennsylvania, then in Indiana, next in New York, then in Rhode Island, next in Nova Scotia, then in Canada, and then in Vermont, which caused my incarceration at Rutland, in February, '69, for a term of ten years; but, through the commutation for good behavior, I was discharged the fourth of February, 1876. From 1857 to the time of my final arrest I probably 'raised' a million dollars in checks and drafts, and made half that amount more from altering court records, forging wills, changing numbers on stolen bonds so they could be put upon the market, and in the thousands of ways in which my dangerous art could be used.

“My daring during my second career of forgery was so great, and I relied so thoroughly upon the perfect execution of my work and my complete knowledge of the French language, that I was whirled into a scheme for relieving, at one stroke, Emperor Maximilian of nearly two millions in gold stored in the treasury vaults of the Mexican capital. Preparatory to this, I went to England, provided myself with a large number of bills of exchange on different French banks, and, after proceeding to Paris, rented quiet lodgings, where I inflated these bills until they represented fabulous sums. After this work was completed, I set about forging letters accrediting myself as a secret agent from the French government to the Mexican emperor and poor Carlotta. These forged papers gave exhaustive political and private reasons why *official* advices should not be burdened with my coming as a secret agent, and also told in writing, too familiar to be mistaken, why this secret ambassador (myself) should be implicitly trusted, and even obeyed, should the condition of things in Mexico, on the agent's arrival, warrant flight.

“As in the case with the Frenchman, Falquet, at Fremont, Ohio, my scheme was to induce the self-crazed emperor to do something *from which he dare not turn back*. I would take my chances on the rest. On arriving at Brownsville, the three men who were to have assisted me in this bold and desperate scheme, learning of the alarming condition of things at the city of Mexico, refused to go any further, and I pursued my journey of adventure alone. Arriving at the capital, I at once gained an interview with the emperor, who seemed in a listless, palsied condition, as if already practically dead, and only sensible of a lingering, undesired existence, and who, while acknowledging the genuineness of my credentials and the necessity for immediate flight, desired five days in which to take counsel and give a decision, though actually ordering a count of the coin and bullion in the treasury vaults. I at once saw that I could not secure the removal of this vast weight—not knowing or daring to trust a soul in that wild country, where every hand held a dagger, and knew how to drive it home too—and felt that it was useless to waste my beautiful English paper where I might not be able to get away with the proceeds of it; and although I held several subsequent interviews with the fated emperor, I saw that my own death was only a question of time if I remained there, and the third day after my arrival in the city of Mexico I left the place for Salt Lake, *via* Santa Fé. Two days after—completing the five days at the expiration of which Maximilian was to have given me his decision—a bullet had put the Austrian dupe beyond the need of raised bills of exchange.”

There is no question but that, in his time, Piper was one of the most skilled of forgers in any country. It is said of him that he spent the best part of eight years of his worthless life in the study of chemistry under the best professors, and at an expense, including the cost of experiments, of what any ordinarily honest man would consider a large fortune. His great skill

secured for him among his class the title of the “invincible;” and it is undoubtedly a fact that there was no bank-note, draft, bill of exchange, certificate, or other monetary paper or legal instrument which he could not so alter, to suit himself or the parties employing him to do the work, as to absolutely defy detection.

In personal appearance he bore a striking resemblance to Professor Swing, the noted Chicago divine, and was one of the smoothest-tongued rascals it has ever been my business to know. He seemed to have a singular faculty of compelling everybody who came in contact with him to like him and even admire him, though they might be perfectly aware of his character; while the man’s nature was a singular mixture of unstinted and reckless generosity, kind-heartedness, brilliancy, cruel recklessness, and heartless criminal daring.

On his liberation from the Vermont penitentiary, in 1876, he professed a complete reform. I believe his professions were genuine. I believe he really meant to live the life of an honest man. Neither am I ashamed to confess that I put my hand in my pocket and helped him, on condition that he would be one in everything he did. But it was too hard work for him. His luxurious habits, the ease with which he could secure money dishonestly, the fascination of the adventure and daring of his old career, all overwhelmed him, and he “broke over,” and sold all the little manhood left in him for the excitement and fleeting pleasures of the adventurer’s life; and, after a short series of successes, he became ill, when of course the friends of his class forsook him, and he died in miserable poverty and disgrace—the fate of nearly every professional criminal that ever existed—on September 4, 1877, at the Robertson House, in the city of Joliet, Illinois, within a few miles of the penitentiary he had a hundred times cheated of deserved convict’s service.

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

This story was included in the illustrated anthology *Criminal Reminiscences and Detective Sketches*.