

The Coiners

—
by a New York Detective
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During the year 1848 the West was flooded with counterfeit coin. It was so well manufactured that it passed readily. The evil at last became so great that the United States authorities requested that a skillful detective might be sent to ferret out the nest of coiners. I was fixed upon to perform the duty.

I had nothing to guide me. The fact, however, that Chicago was the city where the counterfeit coin was most abundant, led me to suspect that the manufactory might be somewhere within its limits. It was, therefore, to the capital of the West that I first proceeded. I spent five weeks in that beautiful city, but without gaining the slightest clue of the counterfeiters.

I began to grow discouraged, and really thought I should be obliged to return home without having achieved any result. One day I received a letter from my wife requesting that I would send her home some money, as she was out of funds. I went into a bank and asked for a draft, at the same time handing a sum of money to pay for it, in which there were several half dollars. The clerk pushed three of the half dollars back to me.

“Counterfeit,” said he.

“What,” said I, “do you mean to tell me those half dollars are counterfeit?”

“I do.”

“Are you certain?”

“Perfectly certain. They are remarkably well executed, but are deficient in weight. See for yourself.”

And he placed one of them in the scales against a genuine half dollar on the other side. The latter weighed down the former.

“That is the best executed counterfeit coin I ever saw in my life,” I exclaimed, examining them very closely. “Is all the counterfeit money in circulation here of the same character as this?”

“O, dear, no,” replied the clerk, “it is not nearly so well done. These are the work of Ned Willett, the famous New York counterfeiter. I know them well, for I have handled a great deal of it in my time. Here is some of the money that is in circulation here,” he added, taking several half dollars from a drawer. “You see the milling is not nearly as perfect as Ned Willett’s, although it is pretty well done, too.”

I compared the two together, and found that he was right. I supplied the place of the three counterfeit half dollars with good coin, and returned the former to my pocket again.

A few days after this I received information which caused me to take a journey to a village situated about thirty miles from Chicago. I arrived there at night and took up my quarters at the only tavern in the place. It was a wretched dwelling, and kept by an old man and woman, the surliest couple I think it has ever been my lot to meet. In answer to my inquiry as to whether I could have lodging there for the night, I noticed that the host gave a peculiar look at his wife, and after some whispering I was informed in the most ungracious manner possible that I could have a bed.

I have frequently in the course of my life been obliged to put up with wretched accommodation, so I did not allow my equanimity of temper to be destroyed by the miserable fare set before me, and the still more miserable sleeping apartment into which I was ushered after I had concluded my repast.

The chamber was small in size, and was certainly well ventilated, for I could see the stars peeping though the roof. The bed was simply a bag of straw thrown into one corner of the room, without sheet or covering of any kind. This last fact, however, was not of much consequence, as it was summer time, and oppressively hot.

I stood for more than an hour gazing out of the opening which served for a window. Before me was spread an immense prairie, the limits of which I could not see. The tavern in which I had taken up my abode appeared to be isolated from all other dwellings, and save the croak of the tree frog and the hum of the locust not a sound reached my ears. It was a beautiful moonlight night, and so bright that I could see to read the smallest print.

At last I began to grow weary, and throwing myself on my pallet I was soon plunged into a deep slumber. How long I slept I know not, but I was awakened by a dull sound, which resembled someone hammering in the distance. I suppose it was the peculiarity of the sound which awoke me, for it was by no means loud, but conveyed to me the idea of some one striking iron with a muffled hammer. I rose up from my bed and went to the window; the moon was low in the western horizon, by which fact I knew that it must be near morning. The sound I have before referred to, reached me more distinctly than when in the back part of the chamber. It appeared to come from some outhouses which were situated about a hundred yards from the house.

Now I am naturally of an inquiring mind, and this sound, occurring as it did in the middle of the night in such a remote, out of the way place, piqued my curiosity, and I felt an irresistible desire to go out and discover the cause of it. This desire, as the sound continued, grew upon me with such intensity that I resolved to gratify it at any price.

I put on my boots, the only article of attire I had discarded, and cautiously opening the door of my chamber, noiselessly descended the [rickety] staircase. A few steps brought

me into the lower apartment, which I found entirely deserted. I crept quietly to the door, and unfastening it without making the slightest noise, was soon in the moonlight.

Not a soul was visible, but the sound still continued, and grew much more distinct as I approached the place from whence it proceeded. At last I found myself before a long, low building, through the crevices of which I could perceive a lurid glare issuing. I stooped down and peered through the keyhole, and to my extreme surprise, I saw a half dozen strong-looking men with their coats off, and sleeves turned up, performing a variety of strange occupations. Some were working at a forge, others were superintending the casting of moulds, and some were engaged in the process of milling coin. In a moment the whole truth burst upon me. Here was the gang of counterfeiterers I was in search of, and the landlord and his wife evidently belonged to the same band, for in one corner I perceived them employed,—the man polishing off some half dollar pieces, just turned from the moulds, while the woman was packing the finished coin into rolls.

I had seen enough, and was about to return to my apartment again, when suddenly I felt a heavy hand placed on my shoulder, and turning my head round, to my horror found myself in the grasp of an ill-looking scoundrel as ever escaped the gallows.

“What are you doing here, my good fellow?” he exclaimed, in a gruff voice, giving me a shake.

“Taking a stroll by midnight,” I replied, endeavoring to maintain my presence of mind.

“Well, perhaps you’ll just take a stroll in here, will you?” returned the ruffian, pushing open the door and dragging me in after him.

All the inmates of the barn immediately stopped work, and rushed towards us when they saw me.

“Why, what’s this?” they all exclaimed.

“A loafer I found peeping outside,” said the man who had captured me.

“He’s a traveler that came to the tavern tonight and asked for lodgings; the last time I saw him he was safe in bed,” said the landlord.

The men withdrew to a corner of the apartment, leaving one to keep guard over me. I soon saw they were in earnest conversation, and were evidently debating some important question. The man keeping guard over me said nothing, but scowled fiercely. I had not uttered a single word during all the time I had been in the barn. I was aware that whatever I might say, would in all probability only do more harm than good, and it has always been a maxim of mine to hold my tongue when in doubt. At last the discussion seemed to be settled, for the blackest and dirtiest of the whole came forward, and without any introduction, exclaimed:

“I say, stranger, look here—you must die!”

I did not move a muscle, nor utter a word.

“You have found out our secret, and dead men tell no tales.”

I was silent.

“We will give you ten minutes to say your prayers, and also allow you the privilege of saying whether you will be hanged or shot.”

Suddenly an idea struck me. I remembered something might save my life. I burst into a violent fit of laughter, in fact it was hysterical, but they did not know that. They looked from one to the other in the greatest amazement.

“Well, he takes it mighty cool, anyhow,” said one.

“I suppose he don’t think we are in earnest,” said another.

“Come, stranger, you had better say your prayers,” said the man who had first spoken, “time flies.”

My only reply was a fit of laughter more violent than the first.

“The man’s mad!” they exclaimed.

“Or drunk,” said some.

“Well, boys,” I cried, speaking for the first time, “this is the best joke I ever seed. What, hang a pal?”

“A pal – you a pal?”

“I aint nothing else,” was my elegant rejoinder.

“What’s your name?”

“Did you ever hear of Ned Willett?” I asked.

“You may be certain of that. Aint he at the head of our profession?”

“Well, then, I’m Ned Willett.”

“You Ned Willett?” they all exclaimed.

“You may bet your life on that,” I returned, swaggering up to the corner where I had seen the old woman counting and packing the counterfeit half dollars.

Fortune favored me. None of the men present had ever seen Ned Willett, although his reputation was well known to them, and my swaggering, insolent manner had somewhat thrown them off their guard, yet I could plainly see that all their doubts were not removed.

“And you call these things well done, do you?” I asked, taking up a roll of the money. “Well, all I can say is that if you can’t do better than this you had better shut up shop, that’s all.”

“Can you show us anything better?” asked one of the men.

“I rather think I can. If I couldn’t I’d go and hang myself.”

“Let’s see it,” they all cried.

This was my last *coup*, and one on which I knew my life depended.

“Lookee here, gentlemen,” I exclaimed, taking one of the counterfeit half dollars from my pocket which had been rejected at the bank, “here is my last job, what do you think of it?”

It was passed from hand to hand, some saying it was no counterfeit at all, others saying that it was.

“How will you prove it is a counterfeit?” asked one of the men.

“By weighing it with a genuine one,” I replied.

This plan was immediately adopted and its character proved.

“Perhaps he got this by accident,” I heard one of the men whisper to another.

“Try these,” said I, taking the other two from my pocket.

All their doubts now vanished.

“Beautiful!” exclaimed some. “Splendid!” said others.

When they had examined it to their satisfaction, they all of them cordially shook me by the hand, every particle of doubt having vanished from their minds. I carried out my part well. Some questions were occasionally asked me, involving some of the technicalities of the business; these, however, I avoided, by stating that I was on a journey of pleasure, and would much rather drink a glass of whiskey than answer questions. The whiskey was

produced, and we made a night of it, and it was not until morning had dawned that we separated.

The next day I returned to Chicago, and brought down the necessary assistance, and captured the whole gang of counterfeiters in the very act. The den was broken up forever, and most of them were condemned to serve a term of years in the State prison.

I have those counterfeit half dollars still in my possession, and intend never to part with them, for they were certainly the means of saving my life.

Ballou's Dollar Monthly Magazine, September 1862

The Hillsdale [MI] Standard, October 10, 1865

The Weekly Perrysburg [OH] Journal, November 24, 1865

The Weekly [Troy] Kansas Chief, March 27, 1879

The Weekly Oskaloosa [IA] Herald, February 20, 1879

This story was later included in the collection *Leaves from the Note-Book of a New York Detective: The Private Record of J. B.* Edited by John B. Williams, M.D. (New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1865. 69-72.). The stories in this volume were purportedly written by the fictional character James Brampton.