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*In the nineteenth century a fad arose for “sunshine and shadow” guide-books that purported to unravel the mysteries of New York, florid tomes (some written by ministers) that warned about fallen women and dangerous neighborhoods, and often titillated under the guise of moralizing. Some works in this genre, such as those by James D. McCabe (1842–83), were better written and more journalistically scrupulous. McCabe dug deep into the criminal world in his book *Lights and Shadows of New York Life* (1872). His section on “Impostors” emphasized an emblematic New York problem: in a young city composed largely of immigrants and strangers knowing nothing of one another’s backgrounds, it was all too easy for a newcomer to adopt a manufactured identity, often for fraudulent ends.*

### IMPOSTORS

THERE IS no city in the Union in which impostors of all kinds flourish so well as in New York. The immense size of the city, the heterogeneous character of its population, and the great variety of the interests and pursuits of the people, are all so many advantages to the cheat and swindler. It would require a volume to detail the tricks of these people, and some of their adventures would equal anything to be found in the annals of romance. All manner of tricks are practised upon the unsuspecting, and generally the perpetrator escapes without punishment. They come here from all parts of the country, and indeed from all parts of the world, in the hope of reaping a rich harvest, and the majority end by eking out a miserable existence in a manner which even the police who watch them so closely are sometimes unable to understand.

They find their way into all classes. One cannot mingle much in society here without meeting some bewhiskered, mysterious individual, who claims to be of noble birth. Sometimes he palms himself off as a political exile, sometimes he is travelling, and is so charmed with New York that he makes it his headquarters, and sometimes he

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lets a few friends into the secret of his rank, and begs that they will not reveal his true title, as a little unpleasant affair, a mere social scandal in his own country, made it necessary for him to absent himself for a while. He hopes the matter will blow over in a few months, and then he will go home. The fashionable New-Yorker, male or female, is powerless against the charms of aristocracy. The "foreign nobleman" is welcomed everywhere, fêted, petted, and allowed almost any privilege he chooses to claim—and he is far from being very modest in this respect; and by and by he is found out to be an impostor, probably the valet of some gentleman of rank in Europe. Then society holds up its hands in holy horror, and vows it always did suspect him. The men in society are weak enough in this respect; but the women are most frequently the victims.

Not long since, a handsome, well got up Englishman came to New York on a brief visit. He called himself Lord Richard X——. Society received him with open arms. Invitations were showered upon him. Brown's hands were always full of cards for his Lordship. The women went wild over him, especially since it was whispered that the young man was heir to a property worth ever so many millions of pounds. In short, his Lordship found himself so popular, and hints of his departure were received with such disfavor by his new found friends, that he concluded to extend his stay in New York indefinitely. He made a fine show, and his toilettes, turnouts, and presents were magnificent. The men did not fancy him. He was too haughty and uncivil, but the ladies found him intensely agreeable. It was whispered by his male acquaintances that he was a good hand at borrowing, and that he was remarkably lucky at cards and at the races. One or two of the large faro banks of the city were certainly the losers by his visits. The ladies, however, were indignant at such stories. His Lordship was divine. All the women were crazy after him, and any of them would have taken him at the first offer.

By and by the newspapers began to take notice of the young man, and boldly asserted that there was no such name as Lord Richard X—— in the British peerage. Society laughed at this, and declared that everybody but ignorant newspaper men was aware that the published lists of titled personages in England were notoriously incomplete.

Meanwhile, his Lordship played his cards well, and it was soon announced that he was "to be married shortly to a well-known belle of Fifth avenue." The women were green with jealousy, and the men, I think, were not a little relieved to find that the lion did not intend devouring all the Fifth avenue belles. The marriage came off in due season; the wedding-presents fairly poured in, and were magnificent. The new Lady X—— was at the summit of her felicity, and was the envied of all who knew her. The happy pair departed on their honeymoon, but his Lordship made no effort to return home to England.

During their absence, it leaked out that Lord X—— was an impostor. Creditors began to pour in upon his father-in-law with anxious inquiries after his Lordship, against whom they held heavy accounts. Proofs of the imposture were numerous and indisputable, and the newspapers declared that Lord X—— would not dare to show his face again in New York. Everybody was laughing at the result of the affair.

What passed between the father-in-law and the young couple is not known; but the bride decided to cling to her husband in spite of the imposture. Father-in-law was a prudent and a sensitive man, and very rich. For his daughter's sake, he accepted the situation. He paid Lord X——'s debts, laughed at the charge of imposture, and spoke warmly to every one he met of the great happiness of his "dear children, Lord and Lady X——." On their return to the city, he received them with a grand party, at which all Fifth avenue was present, and, though he could not silence the comments of society, he succeeded in retaining for his children their places in the world of fashion. He was a nabob, and he knew the power of his wealth. He shook his purse in the face of society, and commanded it to continue to recognize the impostor as Lord X——, and society meekly obeyed him.

Impostures of this kind do not always terminate so fortunately for the parties concerned. New York gossip has many a well-authenticated story of foreign counts and lords, who have set society in a flutter, and have married some foolish, trusting woman, only to be detected when it was too late to prevent the trouble. Some of these

scoundrels have been proved to be married men already, and the consequences of their falsehood have, of course, been more serious to the bride. Others again do not enter the matrimonial market at all, but use their arts to secure loans from their new acquaintances. Not long since a foreigner, calling himself a Russian Count, and claiming to be sent here on a mission connected with the Russian navy, succeeded in borrowing from some credulous acquaintances, who were dazzled by his pretended rank, sums ranging from \$500 to \$2,000, and amounting in the aggregate to \$30,000. When the time of payment arrived, the Count had disappeared, and it was ascertained that he had escaped to Europe.

Impostors of other kinds are numerous. Men and women are always to be found in the city, seeking aid for some charitable institution, with which they claim to be connected. They carry memorandum books and pencils, in the former of which the donor is requested to inscribe his name and the amount of his gift, in order that it may be acknowledged in due form by the proper officers of the institution. Small favors are thankfully received, and they depart, assuring you in the most humble and sanctimonious manner that "the Lord loveth a cheerful giver." If you cannot give to-day, they are willing to call to-morrow—next week—any time that may suit your convenience. You cannot insult them by a sharp refusal, or in any way, for like Uriah Heep they are always "so 'umble." You find it hard to suspect them, but, in truth, they are the most genuine impostors to be met with in the city. They are soliciting money for themselves alone, and have no connection with any charitable institution whatever.

One-armed, or one-legged beggars, whose missing member, sound as your own, is strapped to their bodies so as to be safely out of sight, women wishing to bury their husbands or children, women with hired babies, and sundry other objects calculated to excite your pity, meet you at every step. They are vagabonds. God knows there is misery enough in this great city, but how to tell it from barefaced imposture, is perplexing and harassing to a charitably disposed person. Nine out of ten street beggars in New York are unworthy objects, and to give to them is simply to encourage vagrancy; and yet

to know how to discriminate. That would be valuable knowledge to many people in the great city.

In the fall of 1870, a middle aged woman committed suicide in New York. For some months she had pursued a singular career in the great city, and had literally lived by her wits. While her main object was to live comfortably at other people's expense, she also devoted herself to an attempt to acquire property without paying for it. She arrived in New York in the spring of 1868, and took lodgings at an up-town hotel. She brought no baggage, but assured the clerk that her trunks had been unjustly detained by a boarding house keeper in Boston with whom she had had a difficulty. She succeeded in winning the confidence of the clerk, and told him that she had just come into possession of a fortune of one million dollars, left her by a rich relative, and that she had come to New York to purchase a home. She completely deceived the clerk, who vouched for her respectability and responsibility, and thus satisfied the proprietor of the hotel. She made the acquaintance of nearly all the resident guests of the house, and so won their sympathy and confidence that she was able to borrow from them considerable sums of money. In this way she lived from house to house, making payments on account only when obliged to do so, and when she could no longer remain at the hotels, she took up her quarters at a private boarding house, passing thence to another, and so on. She spent two years in this way, borrowing money continually, and paying very little for her board.

In pursuance of her plan to acquire real estate without paying for it, she made her appearance in the market as a purchaser. In the summer of 1870, she obtained permits of one of the leading real estate agents of the city to examine property in his hands for sale, and finally selected a house on Madison avenue. The price asked was \$100,000, but she coolly declared her readiness to pay the full amount in cash as soon as the necessary deeds could be prepared. The real estate dealer was completely deceived by her seeming frankness, and assured her that he would give his personal attention to the details of the transaction, so that her interests would not suffer, and a day was agreed upon for the completion of the purchase.

The woman then assumed a confidential tone, and told the gentleman of her immense fortune. She was absolutely alone in the city, she said, without relatives or friends to whom she could apply for advice in the management of her property, and she urged him to become her trustee and manage the estate for her, offering him a liberal compensation for his services. Her object was to make him her trustee, induce him to act for her in the purchase of the house, and involve him so far as to secure the success of her scheme for getting possession of the property. The dealer, however, thanked her for her preference, but assured her that it was impossible for him to accept her proposition, as he had made it a rule never to act as trustee for any one. He did not in the least suspect her real design, and but for this previous and fixed determination would have acceded to her request. Finding that she could not shake his resolution, the lady took her departure, promising to return on the day appointed for the payment of the purchase money.

At the time designated, the deeds were ready, and the real estate agent and the owner of the Madison avenue mansion awaited the coming of the lady; but she did not appear, and, after a lapse of several days, the two gentlemen concluded they had been victimized, and then the true character of the trusteeship he had been asked to assume broke upon the real estate agent. The audacity and skill of the scheme fairly staggered him.

After the failure of this scheme, the woman tried several others of a similar character, with the same success. In October, 1870, a city newspaper, having obtained information respecting her transactions from some of her victims, published an account of her career. The next day she committed suicide, and was found dead in her bed.

Not long since a city lawyer, whom we shall call Smith, and who is much given to the procuring of patent divorces for dissatisfied husbands and wives, was visited by a richly dressed lady, who informed him that she was Mrs. P——, the wife of Mr. P——, of Fifth avenue, and that she wished to retain his services in procuring a divorce from her husband, on the ground of ill treatment. Mr. P—— was personally a stranger to the lawyer, who knew him, however, as a man of great wealth. Visions of a heavy fee flashed before him, and

he encouraged the lady to make a full statement of her grievances, promising to do his best to secure the desired divorce in the shortest possible time. He made full notes of her statement, and assured her that he felt confident that he would be able to obtain not only the divorce, but a very large sum as alimony. In reply to her question as to his charge for his services, he replied:

“Well, I ought to charge you \$1000, but out of consideration for your sufferings, I will only take a retainer of \$100, and when we have gained our suit, you will pay me \$500 additional.”

“That is very reasonable,” said the lady, “and I accept the terms. Unfortunately, I have nothing with me but a check for \$200, given me by my husband this morning to use in shopping. I shall only need half of it, and if you could get it cashed for me—but, no matter, I’ll call to-morrow, and make the payment.”

Smith, who had seen the millionaire’s heavy signature at the bottom of the check, thought he had better make sure of his retainer, and offered to accept the check on the spot. He had just \$100 in his pocket, and this he gave to the lady who handed him the check, with the urgent entreaty that he would not betray her to her husband.

“He shall know nothing of the matter until it is too late for him to harm you,” said the lawyer, gallantly, as he bowed his fair client out of the office.

It was after three o’clock, and Smith was forced to wait until the next morning before presenting his check at the bank on which it was drawn. Then, to his astonishment, the teller informed him that the signature of Mr. P—— was a forgery. Thoroughly incensed, Smith hastened to the office of the millionaire, and, laying the check before him, informed him that his wife had been guilty of forging his name, and that he must make the check good, or the lady would be exposed and punished. The millionaire listened blandly, stroking his whiskers musingly, and when the lawyer paused, overcome with excitement, quietly informed him that he was sorry for him, but that he, Mr. P——, had the misfortune to be without a wife. He had been a widower for five years.

*I M P O S T O R S*

How Smith found his way into the street again, he could never tell, but he went back to his work a sadder and a wiser man, musing upon the trickiness of mankind in general, and of women in particular.

*LIGHTS AND SHADOWS OF NEW YORK LIFE, 1872*