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“Trollhätte Svensson” – a Forgotten Swedish Counterfeiter

Bror Wikström*

This is the story of a notorious Swedish counterfeiter, Carl Svensson, who after having committed several crimes in Sweden, for which he spent considerable time in prison, emigrated to the United States in 1887, never to be heard from again.

There have been rumors that Carl Svensson, popularly nicknamed “Trollhätte Svensson”, because of his escapade in the city of Trollhättan, and who called himself Carl Napoleon Svensson (he added Napoleon to his name, in the baptismal register he is only *Carl*) continued his life as a counterfeiter in America. There are also rumors that, after having been apprehended and sentenced for this crime, he ended his life in a U.S. prison by hanging. These rumors have never been proved, but there is enough mystery surrounding “Trollhätte Svensson”, that anything might be possible.

Carl Svensson was born in the parish of Hudene in the county of Älvsborg in Sweden 14 November 1850, the son of Sven Nilsson (1818–1852) and Johanna Larsdotter (1817–1873). Carl was the youngest of three siblings. Already as a child he demonstrated unmistakably that he had great talent as a mechanic. At the age of 15 he became apprenticed to a clockmaker in Vänersborg, later moving to the city of Borås. It was in the latter city that Carl Svensson was to commit his first crime. He and a friend conspired to remove the large bolts which linked two rail sections of the railway line to Borås and hid themselves nearby in order to learn what would happen when the train passed over the loosened rails. Fortunately a rail inspector happened by, discovered the loose rails, alerted the authorities, thereby averting, what might have been a major train catastrophe. Carl Svensson was apprehended and sentenced to six months in jail, barely fifteen years of age.

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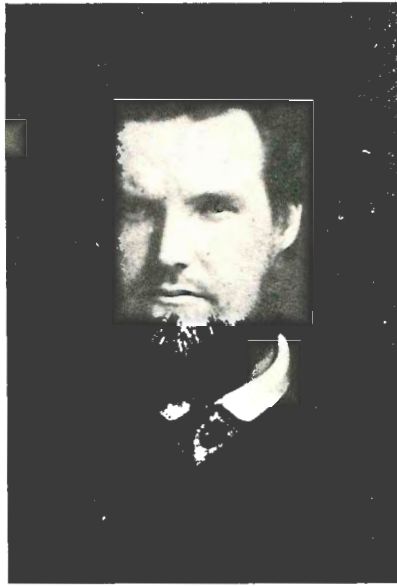
After his release from prison Carl Svensson was employed in several places in Sweden, including Göteborg and Mariestad. In 1870 he arrived in Stockholm, where he secured employment at the shop of a clock manufacturer, Johan Gustaf Wennermark.¹ Svensson was a personable individual, who quickly inspired trust and confidence. He thus was allowed to sleep in the shop, in return for taking care of the boilers and doing the janitorial work.

On 16 December 1870, barely a few months after having arrived in the Swedish capital, Svensson faked a burglary on Wennermark's premises. He was arrested, tried and sentenced to three years of hard labor at Långholmen, Stockholm's most secure prison.

Little is known concerning his activities after his release from prison but by 1876 we find him in the city of Trollhättan, where he secured employment with a clockmaker named J.J. Wennergren. Here he showed himself to be a model employee — industrious, careful about his finances, and carrying out his duties punctiliously. In 1882, however, he found himself in economic straits and it was now that he conceived of the idea of counterfeiting Swedish coins. He rented a small room in a laundry in the city block named "Duvan" along Österlånggatan in Trollhättan (today a large apartment building is to be found on this site). Here Svensson constructed a stamping machine to be used in the manufacturing of parts for clock mechanisms. Under the guise of producing dies for the manufacturing of these clock and watch parts, he was actually processing dies for the striking of Swedish coins in denominations of one *krona*, 50 *öre* and 25 *öre*. Svensson had mastered the electroplating technique according to the Daniell² method, using the acid and reduction idea. He submerged a genuine coin and via the resulting immersion coating of a steel plate (i.e. the die) he got the necessary impression. His bogus coins were cleverly made and difficult to tell from genuine ones. He used his counterfeit coins to buy sheets of copper/nickel alloy at J.F. Lundberg's hardware store in Trollhättan. Soon officials of the local branch of the Vänersborg Bank began noticing that forged one crown pieces were circulating in the city and that they emanated from Lundberg's hardware store. One of the clerks in the hardware store remembered that Svensson always paid for his purchases with "shiny new coins".

The police now took over the case and began shadowing every move by Svensson. When the two policemen assigned to the case, Forsell and Borg, had sufficient evidence that Svensson was their man, they struck and Svensson was arrested on charges of counterfeiting and passing counterfeit coins. This took place on 2 June 1882. After a long trial Carl Svensson was found guilty on both counts and sentenced by the Väne District Court to five years of hard labor at the Central Prison of Malmö.

Five years later, 11 September 1887, Carl Svensson was released from the Malmö prison, at which time he informed the director, Arvid von Metzger,³ that he intended to emigrate to America. At this time he had in his



Carl (Napoleon) Svensson

possession the total sum of 212 *kronor*, which he had earned while serving his sentence. On 11 October 1887 Carl Napoleon Svensson departed from Sweden, destined for New York. That was the last anyone ever heard from him. Except for the rumors alluded to earlier in this account, a curtain of silence descended on “Trollhätte Svensson”.

These are the basic contours of Carl Napoleon Svensson’s life in Sweden. His bogus coins are today collectors’ items, eagerly sought. His one *krona* today commands a price of 1,500 *kronor*, whereas the 50 *öre* piece fetches an even thousand *kronor*.

Svensson did not fit the average idea of a criminal. He was a friendly and trusting individual, who in reality was a very clever watch and clockmaker. It would be of great interest to know more of his life in America. Did he reform and become a useful citizen, perhaps engaged in what he knew best — the making of clocks? Did he marry in his new environment and did he have children? These are questions that crave answers. Any clues as to Carl Napoleon Svensson’s career in the United States would be much appreciated by the author of this modest essay.

¹ As late as 1885, according to a city directory for Stockholm, Johan Gustaf Wennermark, a manufacturer of clocks, had his shop at Kornhamnstorg 47 in the Old City.

² Named for John Frederick Daniell (1790–1845), an English physicist, who first discovered the method of electroplating by means of a galvanic element with electrodes of zinc and copper, the former immersed in sulphuric acid, the latter in a copper sulphate solution. — *Ed.*

³ Arvid Fredrik Wilhelm von Mentzer (1842–1909) became director of the Malmö Central Prison in 1884. — Gustaf Elgenstierna, *Den introducerade svenska adelns ättartavlor* (Stockholm 1925–1936), V, p. 260.