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## 10 Exceptionally Clever Female Con Artists

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Kristy Puchko

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You've heard of "con men"—short for confidence men—but what about the con women of the world? Some deceitful dames used their wits and well-laced lies to achieve great wealth, fame, and even the advantages of the aristocracy.

### 1. AURORA FLORENTINA MAGNUSSON (A.K.A. HELGA DE LA BRACHE)

Back before blood tests were readily available, it was pretty easy to con your way into a wealthy family line. One Swedish orphan proved all you need is a grandiose backstory. In the mid-19th century, Magnusson declared herself [Helga de la Brache](#), the secret daughter of King Gustav IV of Sweden and Queen Frederica of Baden.

She concocted an elaborate tale of the divorced royals reuniting in a German convent and leaving her to live with her "aunt" Princess Sophia Albertine of Sweden. Following Sophia's death—Magnusson's story goes—she was forced into an asylum, where her claims of noble parentage would be sure to be ignored. After her "escape," Magnusson petitioned Sweden for a royal pension deserving of her claimed lineage. However, a trial in 1876 proved all of the above to be pure fiction. Magnusson faced fines, but no jail time. From there, she lived quietly with her female co-conspirator, Henrika Aspegren, for the rest of her days.

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## 2. MARY CARLETON (A.K.A. PRINCESS VAN WOLWAY)



National Portrait Gallery, via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

The old orphaned princess line was previously employed by this 17th century Englishwoman. After two failed and simultaneous marriages, a resulting bigamy trial, and a fling with a wealthy nobleman, [Carleton](#) fled England for the Netherlands. It was upon her return that she used her posh presents and romantic fantasies to remake herself as [Princess van Wolway](#) from Cologne.

With this ruse, she seduced and sometimes wed a string of men, playing each only to rob them. It's believed many of her victims were too embarrassed to reveal her deceit. But enough spurned lovers spoke up that her crimes did catch up with her, earning Carleton a death sentence by hanging at age 30.

## 3. BARBARA ERNI (A.K.A. THE GOLDEN BOOS)

Born to a homeless couple in 18th century Liechtenstein, Erni concocted an unusual way to make a living, and it earned her the nickname "[The Golden Boos](#)." She'd travel the countryside with a trunk she claimed was full of treasure. Wherever she'd stop, she'd ask her hosts to lock it up somewhere safe—like where they kept their valuables. The next day, both the trunk and all the valuables would be gone.

But how did it work? Erni had a little person accomplice who'd lie in wait within the trunk. Left alone, he'd emerge to rob the place before both would make their getaway. While her accomplice's fate is lost to history, Erni was eventually caught, and after confessing to 17 robberies, she was executed by beheading in 1785. Erni has the dubious distinction of being the last person executed in Liechtenstein before its death penalty was abolished.

## 4. BIG BERTHA HEYMAN (A.K.A. THE CONFIDENCE QUEEN)

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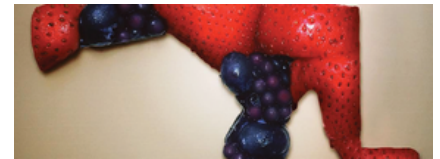
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After coming to America in 1878, this Prussian con artist followed in the criminal footsteps of her forger father, regularly ending up in jail. Arrest record aside, Heyman was considered one of the sharpest con artists working. She [often played](#) on people's hubris, greed, and ambition to her own ends, offering them the promise of wealth later in exchange for a fat load of cash now.

Even behind bars, she managed to bend people to her will. Not only did she swindle more victims while in jail, but also she convinced prison officials to allow her breaks from confinement to take carriage rides around Manhattan, and visits to the theater. It's little wonder she earned the title "[The Confidence Queen](#)."

## 5. MARY BAKER (A.K.A. PRINCESS CARABOO)



Public Domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

One of the most famous princess cons ever perpetrated was the brainchild of an English servant with a big imagination. In 1817, a striking woman in exotic garbs appeared in a small English village, speaking in an indecipherable tongue. A Portuguese sailor conveniently popped up, claiming he could translate. She claimed to be [Princess Caraboo](#) of the island Javasu. Hers was a story of tragedy and danger that had her escaping pirate captors by jumping overboard and swimming through a storm to the safe shores of the English Channel.

This tall tale launched her to near instant fame, and earned her fans in the wealthy Worrall

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family who feted and cared for her with lavish attention. Even when a former employer revealed Baker's true identity, the Worrall family stood by the charming impostor. They paid for her passage to Philadelphia, where her fame—despite its fraudulent claims—only grew. She later [returned](#) to her true homeland (England, not Javasu), occasionally donning her Caraboo costume for public performances.

## 6. CASSIE CHADWICK (A.K.A. THE LOST CARNEGIE)



Public Domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Born [Elizabeth Bigley](#), this Canadian con artist took the princess routine in a distinctly American direction by claiming to be the heiress of a massively wealthy industrialist. Her cons started small in Cleveland, with Chadwick dabbling in fortune telling and forgery. After some jail time served for the latter, the forty-something grifter began her biggest con, claiming to be the illegitimate daughter of steel tycoon Andrew Carnegie.

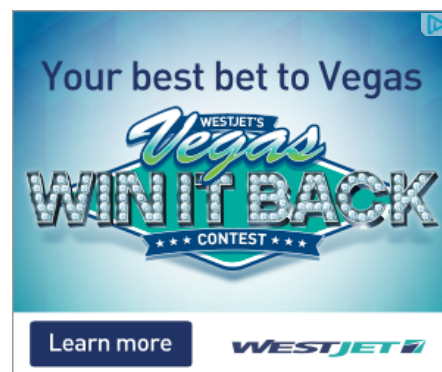
She said he sent her substantial payments to keep her silent, and this was enough for many to give Chadwick hefty loans. One bank lent her a quarter of a million dollars based on her claims, and later went out of business because of it. Carnegie himself attended her eventual trial, which earned Chadwick 10 years in prison. She died in jail in 1907 at the age of 50.

## 7. LINDA TAYLOR (A.K.A.. THE WELFARE QUEEN)

She's not just a con artist but also a galvanizing element of Ronald Reagan's 1976 campaign, where the future president [declared](#), "She used 80 names, 30 addresses, 15 telephone numbers to collect food stamps, Social Security, veterans' benefits for four nonexistent deceased veteran husbands, as well as welfare. Her tax-free cash income alone has been running \$150,000 a year."

Reagan's depiction of "The Welfare Queen" has since been decried as hyperbolic and worse. But Taylor did exploit the welfare system to great lengths through setting up aliases, and spinning her ill-gotten gains into jewelry, furs, and a Cadillac that she'd proudly drive to the public aid office. Taylor eventually did serve time for these offenses.

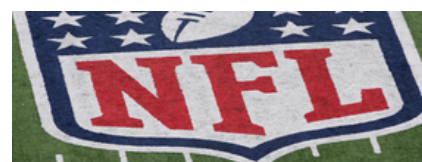
## 8. JEANNE OF VALOIS-SAINT-RÉMY (A.K.A. COMTESSE DE LA MOTTE)



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A Frenchwoman of the 18th century with dubious noble ties, [Valois-Saint-Rémy](#) spawned a con so big that it's said to have helped incite the French Revolution by irreparably damaging the reputation of Queen Marie Antoinette. The Affair of The Diamond Necklace involved the conning comtesse convincing the out-of-favor Cardinal de Rohan to procure the necklace for the queen. Desperate to get in the queen's good graces once more, Cardinal de Rohan wrote the royal letters, for which Valois-Saint-Rémy forged responses. She even employed a Marie Antoinette lookalike for this scam, which ended with de Rohan handing over the hefty piece of jewelry valued at 1,600,000 livres.

When its makers demanded payment from the queen, Valois-Saint-Rémy was arrested and her deception revealed. But in the subsequent trial, the forged letters convinced many that the queen was actually carrying on an affair with the cardinal, further damaging her public persona. The necklace vanished, presumably disassembled for the fencing of its many diamonds. Valois-Saint-Rémy served time, but managed to escape and fled to London. In 1789, she published her [memoir](#), wherein she boldly blamed the late Marie Antoinette for the whole ordeal.

## 9. ANN O'DELIA DISS DEBAR (A.K.A. SWAMI LAURA HOROS)



Library of Congress, via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Having taken on a [slew of aliases](#) in the course of her criminal career, little can be nailed down about this American con woman, including her real name. As enterprising as she is infamous, Debar conned countless people through various scams that capitalized on 19th-century



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spiritualism. This earned her an enemy in dedicated debunker Harry Houdini, who denounced her in his book *A Magician Among The Spirits*, along with the whole Spiritualism movement, for “mothering this immoral woman.”

*The New York Times* described her as a “wonderful crook who without personal charm or attraction has set nations agog with her crimes since her girlhood.” After repeated convictions for fraud in the U.S.—and one for rape and fraud in London—Debar vanished from the spotlight and the police blotter. She was [last spotted](#) in Cincinnati in 1909.

## 10. SARAH RACHEL RUSSELL (A.K.A. THE BEAUTICIAN FROM HELL)

This Victorian-era hustler exploited vanity for profit, promising clients at her upscale London salon everlasting youth, courtesy of her special products, like Rejuvenating Jordan Water, Circassian Golden Hair Wash, Magnetic Rock Dew for Removing Wrinkles, Royal Arabian Face Cream, and Honey of Mount Hymettus wash. All of which were essentially snake oil.

She also dealt in blackmail, and lured women into an Arabian bath that was rumored to have a secret spy hole where men could pay for the privilege to peep. [Her trial](#) in 1868 caused a massive stir, not just for her crimes, but also because it revealed that the women of London were paying far more (in money and attention) on make-up and beauty treatments than social mores suggested. Yet her three years in prison did little to change Russell, who, a decade after her original conviction, faced fraud charges once more. This time, the [Beautician from Hell](#) died in prison.

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