

Written for this Paper.

ROBBING THE MINTS.

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VISITED the mint at Philadelphia last week. It now contains more than \$200,000,000, and it has 50,000,000 standard silver dollars in a single vault. The San Francisco mint has, I am told, more than \$50,000,000 worth of precious metal stored away, and in the vaults of the mint at New Orleans there are now something like \$20,000,000 worth of gold and silver. During my stay in

our Philadelphia treasure house I was shown the different methods by which Uncle Sam guards his hoard. Every atom of gold and silver is watched, and although the mint has handled more than a billion and a half dollars worth of bullion since it was founded, only a small part has been lost. Still the temptation to theft is great, and every now and then the treasury department finds a shortage in some of the mints or in the government assay offices in different parts of the west. The true details of such thefts seldom get into the newspapers. They are filed away in the records of the treasury department and in the minds of the detectives and officials who have aided in exposing the crimes. During the past week I have heard the stories of a number of such robberies, and, in my study of them, I have had access to the records of the treasury, in connection with Hon. R. E. Preston, the director of the mint. Mr. Preston has charge of all the mints in the United States.

He is the chief "watch dog" of Uncle Sam's treasures of gold and silver, and he knows more about the mint, perhaps, than any other man connected with the government. He has been in the employ of the United States treasury for the past forty years, and he is today one of its most efficient officers. You remember how, about two years ago, Henry S. Cochran, the weigh clerk at the Philadelphia mint, stole bars to the value of \$113,000 from the gold vault, stealing it bar by bar from a stack of sixteen million dollars' worth of gold bullion, which was there stored away. Mr. Preston was one of the officials who superintended the putting away of that bullion, and he was acting director of the mint at the time that Cochran's theft was discovered. The first great steal in the Philadelphia mint occurred forty-three years ago, just before Mr. Preston entered the government service, and, curiously enough, this theft was detected by Cochran who was an under clerk of the robber, and who by exposing his superior got the place of weigh clerk, which he held for forty years, and in which he was at the time his own robbery occurred. During the investigation at Philadelphia the thief, Cochran, told Mr. Preston the story, and Mr. Preston repeated it to me today.

"It was away back in 1853," said the director of the mint, "when a vast amount of gold was coming in from California that the first big robbery

occurred. The culprit was James E. Negus, and he was the weigh clerk of the mint. There was at this time no assay office at New York, and all of the gold dust and nuggets were sent by the banks of the different cities to Philadelphia to be reduced to bullion. Negus had the handling of this treasure, and he for a long time carried a systematic stealing from the different deposits sent in. It was his business to take charge of them, weigh them and put them into the vault until they could be melted. By taking a nugget or a pinch of dust from each deposit, he was able to steal thousands of dollars, and he probably carried on his stealings during the whole of the four years that he was in the employ of the mint. Cochran was at this time a boy working in the mint. He acted as Negus' assistant. He was led to suspect that Negus was taking out gold dust and substituting black sand for it in some of the deposits. He took occasion to re-weigh several deposits when Negus was not present, and found that they were from five to ten ounces short. He went to the superintendent of the mint and charged Negus with the theft. Negus was called up. He confessed, and stated that he had stolen \$10,600 worth of gold dust. As you may see from the letters here in the records of the department, the treasury officials believed his confession, but they did not think he should be arrested, as he had made restitution. He was allowed to go free. Within a few weeks he sailed for Europe, and that was the last that was ever heard of him. There was no cable in those days and the probability is that he carried a goodly amount of gold away with him. The robbery was not from the treasury, but from the banks who sent in the gold, and there was no way of telling just how much he stole.

"It was in this way that Henry S. Cochran became weigh clerk of the mint," director Preston went on. "He took the place of a thief, and there is no telling how soon he became a thief himself. He told me that he did not steal anything from the mint until after the deposit of that \$16,000,000 in gold bars; but his connection with the mint lasted for more than forty years, and his position was the same as that of Negus. During his whole term of employment he had the confidence of every one. I have a letter here, signed by Daniel Sturgeon, who was treasurer of the United States when he was appointed. It is he who advises the appointment, and he describes Henry S. Cochran as honest, able and courteous. Cochran seemed to be crazy for gold. He fell in love with the precious metal, and when we found that he had robbed the mint of \$113,000 he hated to give up his stealings and he complained bitterly when the money found in his house was taken away. When he was appointed weigh clerk he was about twenty-three years old. When his robbery was discovered he was sixty-three. He was then a deacon in the Presbyterian Church, and was organizing a campaign for the Salvation Army in the neighborhood in which he lived. He had been married and divorced. He had a grown up daughter. He appeared to be eminently respectable in every way and still he had been stealing for years."

"How did you come to suspect him of the robbery?" I asked.

"It was through his own actions," re-

plied the director of the mint. "He had, you know, the charge of the vaults which contained the gold bullion. Much of this bullion had been untouched for years. In the vaults from which the robbery was made there were \$16,000,000 worth of gold bars. This vault had not been opened for six years. The gold had been brought from the assay office in New York in 1881 and stored away in 1887. I aided in putting it in. The gold bars were piled up crosswise like railroad ties, and they were arranged, as usual, in a series of melts. When we put the gold in the vaults, we put each melt by itself. Each gold brick has its number, and it is marked as to the melt to which it belongs, so we can tell just exactly how many pieces of gold there are in a vault, just where each piece is, and just what it weighs. This bullion was weighed twice before it was put in. There were about twenty-five tons of it. I superintended the weighing. I helped to seal the doors of the vault when we were through, and saw that everything was secured. From time to time the vault was inspected, but the seals were intact, and no one had any idea but that the gold was all there. About two years ago Secretary Carlisle gave orders that the bullion be coined. The vault was opened, and more than 400 pounds of gold were missing. We had little trouble in detecting the thief. Cochran had been much excited when I told him of the intention to coin the bullion.

"He objected, and said the gold was so nicely piled up, and was such a beautiful sight to show the visitors, that the government had better bring some of the bullion from New York and coin it. I laughed at this, and Cochran then insinuated that the gold might not all be there. When he found that we really intended to coin the gold, he came over to Washington to see me, thinking there might be yet a chance to stop it. He called at my house here at 11 o'clock one night, and asked if it was really true that the government was going to take the gold out of that vault. I replied, 'Yes.' He said: 'Well, you won't find all the gold there. Some of it is missing. It was never rightly weighed, and it is not there.' It was at this time that I began to suspect him, and I said to myself, 'Well, if any of that gold is lost, I think you know where it is. A day or so after this we opened the vault, and we found the gold was just \$113,000 short. Still, the seals were intact. The steel walls of the vault were unbroken, and there was no sign as to where the gold had gone. Cochran seemed very nervous, and upon finding that he was suspected, he confessed that he was the thief. He showed how he had fished the gold out with a crooked wire. He had pulled it down from the pile and drag it to the door of the vault, and then by slightly pushing the door at the bottom he was able to get it through the crack between the door and the floor. He had carried it off, bar by bar, in his lunch basket, or in his trousers pocket, and had taken it to his home in the suburbs of Philadelphia.

"What did he do with the gold?" I asked.

"He sold it right back to the mint from which he had stolen it," replied Mr. Preston. "He did not dare to do this without remelting it, and as the gold was so fine that it would be sure to