

A BRANDED COUNTERFEIT.

Gentleman George Tells of a Burglary out of the Usual — Old Tramp's Package of Bills Proved Bogus.

IT'S about time for the sale of old Joey's package and we order watch out for it, sure," remarked Smithers one day, somewhat irreverently.

And then in response to my equally tart inquiry he related the following story, which I tell after my own fashion, since it irks my pen to transcribe his patter.

Some time before Smithers was so fortunate as to connect himself with me, he was traveling west per freight to the name of old Joey. There can be no doubt that old Joey was as disreputable as he was ancient—a tramp by nature, yet prone to wander from the paths of vagrancy into those of criminality. He generally traveled for his health, to which close confinement was detrimental. Shunning observation with that exclusiveness which befits one whose resources are not dependent on the communal spirit of the age.

The old clogger was close mouthed about his graft, but Smithers judged it to be widely comprehensive, not confined to apples, for instance, but comprising any fruit from the tree of knowledge. It was evident, however, that he had not foregathered any plums at all events, and yet he seemed to gain good cheer with every revolution of the wheels.

Smithers noted this peculiarity and by shrewd questions gradually led him to say that he had forwarded by express a certain package to the city of refuge whether they were found, which when retained, would insure for him a residence on the sunny side of Easy Street for life. Further information was hopelessly out of just at this point; for the train, taking a particularly sharp curve in a peculiar hard way, old Joey was jostled from the bumpers and effectually resolved into his component parts along a mile or so of the electric path.

"Why haven't you inquired long ago for this package?" I asked, as Smithers finished with a mortuary tribute quite realistic for repetition.

"You don't know he told me the name and address, do you?" he returned, and upon mature deliberation I didn't.

"Then how are you going to identify it?" I concluded.

"Well," he explained, "the old man's traces were tied up with bits of yellow tape, which I have figured must have been left over from the bundle."

"This furnished a fair working hypothesis, anyhow, and the scheme itself, being a gamble, appealed, of course, to my sporting blood. So in the end Smithers and I occupied front seats at the duly advertised auction of unclaimed packages in the possession of the express company.

The assemblage was as motley as the commodities; and glad I was when Smithers indicated as our quarry a rectangular package, tied with yellow string, which looked for all the world as if it might contain a specimen of the output of some brickyard. This impression seemed to prevail generally, for there was no bidding against me, and the auctioneer jokingly suggested that I should put it in my hat when he knocked it down for 25 cents.

"It's a gold one, Garge," whispered Smithers before we reached the street; and, "fined with your front it or be available among the hayseeds."

I made no reply. I never spoke until we were back in our room. My fingers, tightly clasping that package, kept repeating a message through their sensitive tips which I dare not believe. They trembled as I undid the yellow tape and my whole frame responded as I laid back the wrapper, for that despised specimen, that dubious gold brick, was a solid pile of crisp, new bills!

They were twenties, gold certificates, bearing the vignette of Mr. Secretary Manning, as like as if he had just called the convention to order, and as fresh, as unspotted as if a little girl in the bureau of printing and engraving had



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stripped them from the plate. Oh, the darlings! I counted them over, one after another, each one the more beautiful for being so perfect a copy of its beautiful predecessor: Five hundred, seven hundred, nine hundred and ninety.

"The queer, the whole queer, and nothing but the queer!" I groaned, after a half hour's close and critical examination.

"What, what of it?" retorted Smithers, stolidly. "I don't believe in bel's no blame particular. Think of the gloons and faro banks, Garge, that would swallow them bills in a gulp and reach for more."

The owner, an old man named Craigie, was popularly supposed to be a miser. If so, so much the better; since he would treasure the notes instead of putting them into circulation. He should say that the number Craigie now had corresponded pretty closely with the size of our package, but there would be ample opportunity to run them over so as to make the substitution exact.

Servants? All he had seen were an old woman and an older man; you could knock them down together with a breath. He had heard something about a housekeeper, but what of it? A competent housekeeper never allowed her rest to be disturbed; and a good rule, too, for this one, if she wanted to save her cronk! Thus, Slim Maccles, after a disreputable expurgation, it was a go; it was sure to be a go!

We planned cautiously, we executed boldly—two essentials to success. The very next night we drove out to the Craigie plantation. We hitched the team in a remote grove; we made our way across fields to the house. All was silent save for our breathing; all was dark save for the furtive gleams from the gim under Smithers' skillful management. Evidently the old man's faith in the safe was supreme, for he had no difficulty in entering the library after the manner Slim Maccles had indicated.

A noble room, lofty and wide, with frequent recesses and curtained doorways on either side. Opposite the fireplace, abutted the round, polished plate of the safe, set in solid masonry. Slim's fine ear was close to the steel; Slim's tentaclelike fingers slowly turned the knob, this way and that. There was a faint click, click, and the man, springing to his feet in triumph, gave a pull on the spring and the elaborate mechanism swung open.

Smithers drew nearer with the gim. Again those marvelous senses, by gold and touch, interpreted and betrayed the secret of safety. The inner compartment lay exposed; its treasure of crisp new twenties was at our mercy.

"Count them," I whispered, and as Slim obeyed Smithers and I, under our breath, repeated the toll.

Five hundred, seven hundred, nine hundred and ninety-nine, one thousand hundreds in all, as fresh, as unspotted as when first verified at the treasury department! Oh, it was wonderful; the good bills corresponded exactly with the bad! No need of carrying away any of the limitations, so incontinent, so true of the true darlings, each of which was a guaranty for so much sport and dash and fling! Quick, then, let us take the goods the gods had provided, lest they envy and subvert our happiness.

In an instant Slim had thrust the good money into his pocket and the counterfeit into the compartment. A deft turn here, a cunning twist there, and again the polished steel eye kept its futile watch in the solid masonry. We were out on the piazza, pausing for a moment while Smithers slipped back into place the window bolt, and then, Oh, then, as silent, as safe as shadows, we stole through the plantation to the grove where we had left our conveyance. There we clasped hands and

whirled round and round in an ecstasy of joy, only to fall into the depths of agony when, with sudden recollection I cried:

"My God, what fools we are! Ye left the branded counterfeit with the others!"

And so we had. Our unexpected good luck in finding that the amounts of the two piles of notes exactly corresponded, joined to the nervous excitement under which we were acting, had confined our thoughts to the one purpose of making the substitution and getting away. Stupid, inexcusably stupid; yes, of course, it was, but try burglarizing yourself, Oh, errie, and see whether in the unknown, portentous darkness, where every inanimate object is an enemy in ambush and who war against you, you may not make a natural but fatal slip. If you do not, you're a good one, for to my mind the stoutest defense of society lies in the human frailties of those who war against it.

Then, with a gasp, I remembered that on all sides, the suggestion from me, backed up by Smithers that we had best let well enough alone, and stubborn opposition from Slim Maccles.

"No, siree," he reiterated, "I've got the bills in my clothes, and I won't take them out until I have replaced that cursed stamped thing for one of them! Wadder you take me for? Do you think you can play me in anny sech way? Hain't I tole you that I'm the one that wud be suspected? Do yo s'pose I can't see that when that old popperry runs over his feet in the morning, he comes across anny sech knock down argymen he will know I've been there and will have the hull push in a hue an' cry on my heels? Not on yer life! Eeder we all goes back together or I goes alone, and to oncut!"

Resistance was useless. You can't reason with such iron bound obstinacy; and, of course, I discarded Smithers' mute but vigorous hint, conveyed by a clutch on my throat, that we should proceed to sterner measures. So in the end we retraced our steps, but in a far different mood, that presaged danger and defeat. Yes, it is the manner of an enterprise as well as the means that insures success.

So far as physical conditions were concerned, we were certainly better off than when we had made our first attempt. There were still some hours of the night remaining; we knew the way; there was nothing to be feared from watchmen or alarms. And yet the fine, reckless spirit which had animated us was missing. Then we had advanced with the assurance of conquerors; now we stalked like dogs to a beating.

There is a good deal of rot in the terms of psychology; but look out for its essence, I say, if it turns against you!

However, everything proceeded so favorably as to give the lie to our depression. The entrance through the window, the opening of the safe and the compartment, the removal of the pile of spurious notes, all passed as smoothly as a well rehearsed scene.

"Here's the cursed 'ting," growled Maccles, as he took out the branded counterfeit, and substituted in its stead good notes.

Those were his last words! There was a blaze of light from myriad electric bulbs; a report, sharp, but not loud; Slim Maccles swayed on his knees and toppled over with a bullet through his brain; while at the curtained doorway opposite stood the housekeeper, leveling at smoking revolver, with an abandon as disgraceable as it was essentially feminine!

"Don't move, you two," she said in equable tones, "for I shoot quick!"

"Too damn quick," muttered Smithers, as from convict habit, strong within him, he folded his arms and turned his face to the wall.

She drew nearer, a fragile, little woman, neutral tinted, with anxious lines about the eyes and mouth, yet bearing herself with a dogged determination which, I now think, indicated a past history and a present purpose, alike dubious. She drew nearer, and gazed curiously on the two piles of notes weighted down by the dead man's hands.

"What does all this mean," she demanded.

I listened breathlessly. There was not a sound in the great house; that sharp little report, however, had stirred the old master or the older servants; it was safe as it was prudent to parley and so I told her. Her face changed, as I explained our scheme, growing softer, almost beautiful with anticipation, wonder, light.

"Which one is it?" she began and then she snapped short as if from second, wiser thought. "I mean," she went on softly, "that I don't want to be hard on you two men. Your companion is dead; your plan frustrated; why should I alarm the house and give you over into custody. Take them, a few of the good notes, enough for you present wants and go your way," and her sharp eyes watched our movements like a cat's.

If it was her purpose to learn beyond a possibility of mistake which pile contained the genuine money, she did not have long to wait. Smithers made a grab and was out of the window like a flash; and I followed as speedily as my more decorous ideas would permit. An hour later, we were back again in town, wiser, but not much richer for our surprising experience.

The sequel, however, was still more surprising. For the next few days the papers were filled with sensational accounts of the burglary; but not one word was said of Slim Maccles' companions nor one word of the counterfeits and our scheme of substitution. The one person free to tell, for reasons of her own, held her peace.

What these reasons were, of course, I do not know; yet I can make a shrewd guess that when Mr. Craigie's heirs enter into their inheritance, they will find little real value in the crisp, fresh twenties which he so lovingly hoarded in his safe.—New York Sun.

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