

The Sham Counterfeiter

BY A LONDON DETECTIVE OFFICER

Whenever my boot wanted mending, I need to take them to an honest, hard-working old fellow, Jacob Carnes, by name, who like most cobblers I have met with, was what is called a long headed fellow. Jacob was a good politician, and could he have had the directing the affairs of the nation, I do not hesitate to say, that we should never have groaned under an income tax. A stern disciple of Joseph Hume, my old friend Jacob would have the most rigid economy in national expenditure. Every budget the Chancellor of the Exchequer brought out cost him many groans and sleepless nights; and when his model statesman, Joseph Hume, died, Jacob verily believed that England would speedily go to the dogs.

But Jacob was a jovial fellow withal, though somewhat addicted to grumbling. He had a merry twinkle in his eye, and could tell many a good story, the fun of which he seemed to relish most heartily. I have spent many pleasant hours in Jacob's little shop, where there was but little room for company; my seat was on the window-sill, and there I loved to sit and listen to old Jacob's eloquent denunciation of extravagant expenditure, and tirades against the supineness of the professed reformers.

One evening when I called upon Jacob to fetch away a pair of boots I had given him to heel, I found him very gloomy; the hammer was going as usual, but without the accompaniment of whistle or song. On a little bench opposite to where he sat at work, I observed a half-crown lying.

"Good evening, friend Jacob; what's the news?"

"Good news, I think you said; bad enough for me, I can tell you."

"Why, Jacob, what's the trouble?"

"There," said he, picking up the half-crown and tossing it to me, "look at it and tell me what you think of it."

"It's a bad one!" I exclaimed.

"A bad one! You think so, do you? Well so do I."

"Pray where did you get it?"

"Took it from a customer. Heeling a pair of boots, one shilling, change eighteen pence."

"Somebody you know, I suppose?"

"No, a confounded foreigner. If I had my will, I'd send 'em all out of the country, back to where they came from."

“Jacob you would not be so liberal, I’m sure. Why you’re a foreigner yourself, at least, your grandfather was.”

“Ah, well, he was a respectable man; he was no smasher, going about robbing honest, hard-working men.”

“So this smasher was a foreigner, was he? Do you think you would know him again if you were to see him?”

“Sure I would. I’ll just describe him to you. Tall, about your height; fair hair, red whiskers, beard and moustache! blue eyes; stoops in his walk; scar an inch long on his left cheek; lost a joint off the fore-finger of his left hand; hands very dirty, stained probably; dress loose brown paletot, gray waistcoat and trousers, wide-awake hat.”

“Well, really, Jacob, I must give you credit for being a close observer. I am pretty sure I should recognize the gentleman if I were to meet him.”

“I hope if you do meet him you will hold him till I come.”

I was sorry for Jacob. Half-a-crown may appear an insignificant sum to some people, but it was the price of half a day’s hard work to Jacob. But I had got the fellow’s portrait in my mind’s eye—thanks to Jacob’s description—and I had some hope I might meet with him.

A few days subsequent to Jacob’s ill-luck I was, early one evening, passing through Aldgate, when I stepped into a coffee house to obtain some refreshment. I was greatly fatigued having had no rest for two nights previous and while perusing the evening paper, after partaking of my chop and cup of tea, I incontinently dozed off to sleep.

While asleep I had a dream. I dreamed of Jacob’s counterfeit. I thought I saw a group of people, men and women, in great agitation, standing in a circle in the open street with their palms extended, and in each a silver coin. Suddenly they turned their heads and all looked in the same direction. My eyes followed theirs, and I saw a man whom I immediately recognized to be the man whom Jacob had described so minutely to me. He ran; the crowd all joined in pursuit. I attempted to run, too; but in making the effort to do so, I dropped my newspaper and awoke.

I rubbed my eyes, felt very confused, looked round for the smasher, but recognizing where I was I closed my eyes again and dropped asleep.

Again I dreamed a dream. This time I thought I was in the coffee house reading a newspaper; it was nearly dusk. Presently it seemed that, in the gloomy shadow of the box within which I was seated, a man sidled up to me and laid his hand on my wrist; the contact of his heavy clammy hand on mine gave me a cold chill, and I shuddered. Putting his mouth to my ear, he whispered hoarsely:

“Do you want to buy any queer soft?”

“Queer soft,” said I, “what’s that?”

He laughed ironically, showing a hideous mouthful of big teeth.

“You call yourself a detective, and pretend not to know what queer soft is.”

I felt indignant and humiliated, and was about to rise up and lay hold on him, when I again awoke.

If I did not know what “queer soft,” is when asleep, I was not so ignorant when awake. In my dream I had been haunted by a counterfeiter, vulgarly called a smasher.

Overpowered as I was with fatigue and want of my proper allowance of sleep, these intermitting dozes made my faculties unusually dull. While rubbing my eyes, a tall fellow came out of a box behind that in which I was sitting, and passed out.

It was not until he had been gone two or three minutes that the thought flashed across my mind that this tall fellow might be Jacob’s bad customer. I had not seen his face, but what I saw of his back corresponded with Jacob’s description of him. I hastily took up my hat and rushed to the door, but the tall fellow was nowhere to be seen.

I returned to my seat in the box, but before sitting down, I peered over into the adjoining box from whence I supposed the tall fellow had emerged. There I saw a man with a half-crown piece in his hand carefully scrutinizing it. I immediately stepped into the box, and seated myself opposite to him. He looked like a simple countryman, but wearing a peculiar air of knowingness which rustics are wont to assume when among the Philistines.

“Well, John,” said I, “how are you? When did you come to town?”

He looked up bewildered, opening his eyes and mouth to their widest, and replied—

“Pretty well, a thank ye, mister? You seems to know I, but I’m darned if I knows you.”

“Your memory is not so good as mine,” I replied; “how’s all the folks at home?”

“I left ‘em all pretty well,” he answered, rising up as if to make a move to go. He seemed quite uncomfortable in my presence.

“Stop a bit,” I said. “Who was that tall fellow who just went out?”

“You know as well as I do.”

“Did he have anything to say to you?”

“Well, he did talk a bit.”

“Did he want to do any business with you?”

“Do you know what his business is?”

“To be sure I do. He’s a smasher.”

“And what’s a smasher?”

“A dealer in bad money.”

“Exac’ly so. He wanted me to buy some.”

“And did you buy any?”

“He made me take this as a sample,” handing me the half-crown I had seen him inspecting.

“What’s his price for this article?”

“Five pounds a hundred.”

“And he’s gone to fetch them perhaps?”

“No; I am to meet him in Battersea Fields, to-morrow night at eight o’clock. He says he cannot carry the stuff along with him, because of the risk—if it should be found in his possession—of his being transported. He only carries one piece about with him as a sample.”

“If this is a true sample,” I observed, “you will make a good bargain at a shilling a-piece. This is a good half-crown?”

“You don’t mean that? It feels very greasy.”

“That is because it is old, and worn smooth—well, when you go to Battersea Fields, I should like to go with you; I want to make the acquaintance of your money-dealer.”

“I can’t take you, as he made me promise to go alone.”

“Well, I need not go with you, nor be seen, but I shall be there. You may want my assistance, perhaps. Good-by, for the present.”

Here, then, was one of the new class of dodgers, who find many ready dupes, managed to carry on a profitable business, ostensibly dangerous, but in reality without incurring any risk of punishment. If one was a knave; the other was a dupe with a criminal intent, who had no claim to justice. He was only the biter bitten.

The scheme of operation was as follows: The fellow goes about in like quarters, representing that he has a lot of counterfeit money for sale, of first-rate quality, which nobody can detect, and which he offers at a tempting price. He generally operates upon beer-shop keepers, and a certain class of small trades-men. He does not go to work blindly or at hap-hazard. He first reconnoiters, surveys the ground, scrutinizes the intended dupe, drinks his beer, and, if he finds his intended victim soft, he broaches the topic of counterfeit money. He is always provided with a genuine half-crown, of greasy feel, which he submits to inspection as a fair example of queer soft.

“You don’t mean to say this is a bad one?” asks the dupe.

“Yes it is; pretty good sort, isn’t it?”

“Feels greasy, though.”

“Yes, that one does, because I have been carrying it in my pocket with some coppers.”

The dupe, seeing plainly that the coin is a good one, thinks there will be little risk, and no harm is buying a lot of it; but continuing to profess his doubts, the knave proposes that he shall send the coin to a neighboring grocer’s or cheesemonger’s, for half a pound of sugar or butter. Of course, the coin being a good one, is readily taken, and the knave wins a deeper confidence at the cost of a few pence. There is no longer any difficulty in striking a bargain. He will take five or ten pound’s worth at the price agreed upon.

The knave then proceeds to urge the great risk he would run by carrying such a quantity of counterfeit money about his person. The police might get scent of it, and if sent to the Old Bailey for trial, it might go hard with him; and, moreover, to prevent being betrayed he never carries more than one piece about with him. He must be careful. Therefore he appoints a meeting with the dupe in the suburbs, where he can see if he is watched. The place of appointment is generally some unfinished villa or mansion, about Hampstead, Highgate, Clapham, &c. When the dupe arrives at the appointed place, the knave pretends his “friend” is concealed in the empty house with the “stuff.” He coaxes the dupe out of his money, and pretends to go into the house, leaving his victim waiting outside.

The knave then cautiously proceeds round to the back of the house, but is no sooner out of the victim’s sight than he jumps over the fence and disappears, leaving the dupe to relish the trick as he best may.

I had no doubt that Jacob’s bad customer and the tall fellow in the coffee-house were one and the same person—a fellow who had been carrying on this game successfully for two or three years.

Next day, early in the evening, I proceeded with a brother officer, to Battersea Fields, where the countryman had made an appointment with the money-dealer. We fortunately succeeded in concealing ourselves unobserved in the very empty house where the knave had appointed to meet his dupe. As we knew very well that he had no intention of entering the house, we planted ourselves in some out-houses, one on each side of the house, so as to make sure of intercepting him.

In due time, we saw both knave and dupe approach the house. Cautiously surveying the ground, and then proceeded to the gate entering upon the lawn, where a parley ensued. The countryman showed reluctance to part with his money, but finally seemed prevailed upon, and counted out his five sovereigns.

The knave was over the gate and into the grounds as quickly as a greyhound. He was so active in his movements, that although he came past close by to where I was standing, he got the start of me, and was over the fence in the twinkling of an eye. I signaled my brother officer, who quickly rejoined me, and off we started in pursuit. A pretty long chase he led us. However, we finally captured him, and lodged him in safe keeping at Wandsworth. Upon searching him, we found the five sovereigns he had obtained from the countryman, and two half-crowns one of which was counterfeit.

Next day I called on my friend Jacob, and related my adventure to him. He was present at the felon's first examination, and testified that he had passed a bad half-crown upon him. The knave was remanded.

Of course his examination was reported in the newspapers, and upon his next appearance in public there was a crowd of his dupes in the court, the countryman among the rest. But what could they say or do? They had engaged themselves in a criminal business, and had been bitten, caught in their own snare. Had they succeeded in obtaining the counterfeit money, they would have had no compunction in passing it off on any hard-working, honest man, a little the worse for drink. They could not, therefore, ask for sympathy or redress, and long before the examination was over, they had all disappeared from the court.

There was an other plan, by the operation of which this knave succeeded in obtaining several sums of money from credulous people.

He would seek out some hard-working man who had saved a little money, and getting into conversation with him, would pretend to commiserate his unfortunate condition,

“You are a great fool,” he would say, “to work like this, when you could do so much better.”

“Show me how, then.”

“Well, you see I am an agent for a very large building society, and can get a trusty man a situation of two hundred a year. Of course, I should expect something for myself.”

“How much?”

“Well, I think it is worth ten pounds.”

“I would not mind giving you that for such a place you speak of. You are quite sure you can get it for me?”

“Come with me to-morrow. I’ll introduce you to the manager, and the thing will be done. Of course you can bring some testimonials. My recommendation is sufficient, but the papers are wanted, just for form’s sake.”

Next day the knave accompanies the dupe to a lot of houses in course of erection, takes him into a room, gets from him his commission, says he will go up-stairs and see if the manager is disengaged, but forgets to come down the same way; proceeds over the roof to the next house, and down that staircase, and decamps.

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