

Extensive Counterfeiting

Seizure of Fifty Thousand Dollars in Spurious Postal Currency—Arrest of the Counterfeiter— His Confession

IN the New York Times of November 20, 1865, we find an article with the above caption, and which we copy as below. The arrest therein spoken of created much sensation at the time, as well it might. Officer McWatters acted in the matter, not only as an ordinary member of the police force, but in the capacity of a detective, and won great credit by his sagacity.

“An important arrest was effected in Brooklyn last Tuesday, the particulars of which have been suppressed up to the present time. The Treasury Department at Washington have long been aware that the business of counterfeiting greenbacks and postal currency has been carried on to an alarming extent at different points throughout the country, but their endeavors to arrest the guilty parties have, with a few exceptions, been attended with failure, or only partial success. One exceedingly skilful engraver of bogus postal currency has been especially marked as the most dangerous operator, inasmuch as his execution was so perfect as frequently to deceive even the Government officials; and the boldness of the counterfeiter was almost as great as his skill. The man in question is an English engraver, by the name of Charles J. Roberts. The best Government detectives have been on his track for six months, without succeeding in finding him, until last Tuesday, when his arrest was effected in Brooklyn, by Messrs. R. R. Lowell and A. J. Otto, detectives in the service of the Treasury Department, with the assistance of Officer McWatters, of the Twenty-Sixth Metropolitan Precinct.

“The operations of Roberts have been mainly confined to Philadelphia, in the suburbs of which city his “money mill” was situated. The last counterfeit pieces which he made, and which, in an indirect manner, led to his arrest, were copies of the latest issue of fifty cent postal currency. They are of steel, and the impression from them is so beautiful and perfect, as to be entirely undistinguishable from that of the genuine plates. Upon this counterfeit the criminal artist had exerted his skill with the most elaborate patience and precision, intending to make it, in every sense, a *perfect* resemblance, which would even escape the suspicion of the Government detectives.

“But though an engraver, Roberts was not a printer. His plate was perfection, but unaided, or assisted only by mediocre printers, he could not produce an impression equally perfect. He therefore left Philadelphia a short time ago to seek the services of a Brooklyn printer, whom he understood to have been in the counterfeiting business, and who was well known to be a mechanic of extraordinary skill. Unluckily for the English operator, this printer was in the service of the Government detectives, who were, therefore, promptly informed of the whereabouts of the game for which they had so long been in pursuit.

“Messrs. Lowell and Otto, McWatters and others, accordingly surprised Roberts in his Brooklyn retreat, on Tuesday morning last, at 9-30. The counterfeiter made a desperate resistance, swearing that he would die sooner than be taken; but the detectives were too many for him. He was knocked down, disarmed, and speedily lodged in the Raymond Street jail.

“The arrest was kept a profound secret, to allow the detectives time to effect the seizure of the plates and counterfeit money already manufactured in Philadelphia, which they were unable to do prior to the arrest. They also knew of twenty thousand dollars in the fraudulent currency, which the manufacturer had brought with him to Brooklyn, and which they hoped to procure. After lodging their prisoner in confinement, they immediately set out for Philadelphia, found the mill, and seized its contents, comprising the plates, tools, presses, fifty thousand dollars’ worth of the fraudulent currency, all in fifty cent postage stamps. Some of it was in an unfinished state, but the detectives declare that the completed issues would have deceived them instantly; that they would never have doubted their genuineness. But they were outwitted by the prisoner, so far as the counterfeits in Brooklyn were concerned. During the absence of his captors, Roberts managed to have the following letter conveyed to his mistress and confederate:—

““BROOKLYN, November—. 1865.

““MARY: Please go at once, when you receive this, and tell Louisa to come and see me at once. *Tell her to clean things away.* I am at Raymond Street jail. Please go some roundabout way, and take care nobody follows you. Tell Louisa to keep cool. I am all right. Do this right away, please, to-night, and oblige,

““Yours, CHARLES J. ROBERTS.

““MRS. LLOYD, corner North First Street and Third Street, Brooklyn, E. D.’

“This note was conveyed to the above address by the brother of the sheriff who had the prisoner in charge, whence it reached ‘Louisa,’ who, of course, ‘cleaned things away,’ much to the disappointment of the detectives, when they called for the purpose of making the seizure. The guilty brother of the sheriff has fled, and has thus far effected his escape.

“The detectives are now in pursuit of a confederate of Roberts, and they are quite confident of soon capturing him. Since his incarceration Roberts has confessed everything. He says that the plate which has been seized was intended for his final and greatest effort. If the detectives had only held off for another week he would have made one hundred thousand dollars, and been in Europe enjoying it. We understand that Roberts’s new counterfeits, to the extent of twenty thousand dollars, are already afloat.

“Overton, the counterfeiter of twenty-five cent stamps, who was arrested some time ago, pleaded guilty on Friday last. Roberts will also probably be speedily convicted, and, as he is not so fortunate as to have ‘a wife and nine children,’ there is no likelihood of his receiving the hasty pardon which was recently granted to Antonio Rosa, a similar criminal.”

McWatters, George. *Knots Untied; or, Ways and By-Ways in the Hidden Life of American Detectives.* Hartford: J. B. Burr, 1871.

