

*Breaking Up A Gang*  
*A Detective's Story*  
By Emerson Bennett

IF there has been a period, since money became a circulating medium, in which rascals have not dishonestly sought to flourish by counterfeiting, I am not aware of it—certainly no such millennial forbearance had existed in my day and recollection. Thirty years have I been authoritatively engaged in detecting crime, and at least two thirds of my efforts have been directed against forgers, counterfeiters, coiners, and passers of spurious money. Of course I have seen brought about some curious developments in my time, and more than once I had reason to thank God that some adventure of my own did not terminate with my life.

Some years ago, it matters not how many, several of the leading banks of the country, located in Boston, New York and Philadelphia, made a startling discovery at the same time, not only that an immense number of counterfeit issues of their respective institutions had been suddenly put in circulation, but that they were so perfectly executed as to have deceived, in many instances, the officers themselves. This alarming state of affairs led to the conclusion that there must be a large organization of the most adroit scoundrels at work in concert, which would require all the detective skill in the country to ferret out and suppress; and every man of any note in this line of business was forthwith called upon to act, my humble self among the number.

The first important matter, according to my view, was to trace some of these notes to the first circulators, and then lay some plan to get into their confidence, and gradually work my way back to the principals. There was, to begin with, at least one man whom I had reason to suspect of having something to do in this line, and I resolved to make the most of him. He was, more apparently, than anything else, a liquor dealer, lived in Boston, and knew me by sight. I had often passed his place of business, and noticed, going in and coming out, a class of scoundrels that I knew were not concerned in more liquor than could be sent down their throats, and which they might have got elsewhere better than there, had there been nothing else to attract them thither. It was a bold, desperate part I was about to play now, and I prepared myself accordingly. I had a light complexion and light hair, and I put on a black wig and stained my skin so as to resemble a dark man who has been a good deal exposed to the weather. To my almost beardless face I added bushy whiskers, and light green glasses covered my blue eyes. Thus disguised, and plainly dressed, I, one warm afternoon, well covered with dust, dropped into the liquor establishment of Silas Waterman. Mr. Waterman was there. I knew him, but he did not know me. I wanted to buy a small keg of whiskey; and after trying three or four kinds pretty freely, I decided upon one, and wrote down the directions for sending it home.

“It aint for me,” said I, with rustic simplicity, “but I’ll pay for’t just the same as if it was;” and I immediately handed the proprietor one of the new counterfeit fifty dollar bills.

I saw him kind of start, as he took it in his hand; and then he examined it very closely, and with the air of a man who was thinking at the same time what he should do or say.

“Where did you get this?” he asked at length, looking rather curiously at me.

“I got it out of the bank itself,” I answered, working the blood up into my face, by a trick I understood, so as to make it very red.

He looked hard at me again—looked knowingly, quizzically, into my eye, and rejoined, with a solemn shake of the head:

“No, you didn’t!”

“I did!” I persisted—but purposely allowed my eye to grow restless under his searching glance.

“Come! come! don’t add lying to your other sins!” he said, with a look calculated to make a guilty man quail.

“What do you mean?” I cried, apparently growing very indignant, as if to cover my real alarm. “I didn’t come here to be insulted; and if you’ll just give me back my money, I’ll go somewhere else and deal. Come, hand it here, or else change it darn quick!”

“Oh, not so fast, my rural friend! Be a little cautious how you talk, or you’ll never get it, nor the change either!”

“Then I’ll have you arrested!” said I.

“No, you won’t!” he returned, with a leer; “you darsn’t! you’re scared now! you know this note’s a counterfeit!”

“I don’t know nothing of the kind!” I replied, beginning to grow very nervous and uneasy; “just give it back to me; I got it out of the bank this very day—not more’n an hour ago—on a check that a friend of mine sent up to town; and here’s two others that they give me at the same time, on two good New York banks, if you like them any better!” and I produced two more fifties of the new counterfeits.

I saw his eyes brighten as he glanced at them, and he politely asked me to step back into a small counting-room. Closing and locking the door as soon as I entered, he said:

“Come, my friend, tell me where you got these bills, and what you paid for them, and perhaps I can supply you at cheaper rates?”

“What do you mean?” I again inquired.

“Oh, this nonsense is wasting time!” he answered hurriedly. “You know, and I know, that you bought those notes to *sell*; and what I want to know now is, where you got them, and what you gave for them?”

“How do I know you’re all right?” said I, with a natural caution, at the same time looking not a little surprised.

“Oh, I’ll soon prove to you that I’m all right—that I’m in the same line, in fact!” he rejoined.

And he did, by showing me large rolls of the spurious notes, of all sizes and denominations; and from that moment, you see, I began to have confidence in him, and we soon became as intimate as two thieves.

This was the beginning of my discoveries, which I carried out in detail; but a description of which I fear would prove more tedious than interesting, and so I will pass rapidly to the grand *denouement*.

Three months of very shrewd and careful operations, brought me hovering around the great centre of this vast organization of crime, which was located in a wild, mountainous region of northern New York, whence escape, with reasonable warning, could be made across the lines to Canada, where the rogues would be comparatively safe, there being no extradition treaty at that time to disturb them.

I had a very difficult and dangerous part to play, to ingratiate myself with these villains, worm myself into their confidence and secrets, establish myself above suspicion, and at the same time keep up communication with their enemies in the world of society beyond them; but I succeeded in all this at the hazard of my life, knowing that discovery of my true character while among them would result in certain death.

In the heart of a wild, uninhabited, mountainous region, with its secret paths and perilous approaches, a band of ingenious and daring fellows, united by the most terrible oaths, had established their headquarters of crime; and here they had collected tools and machinery, of the best manufacture, from various parts of the world, for the purpose of carrying out their nefarious design of almost perfect coining and counterfeiting. Engravers, moulders, die-sinkers, printers, press-men and forgers, were all here, with all the articles belonging to their various crafts, each one a perfect master in his department. Far down in the bowels of a mountain, in a cave partially formed by nature and the rest by art, and lighted by artificial gas, they had established a criminal manufactory, which had already caused a great commotion throughout every section of the country. Fifty-three individuals, most of whom had served one or more terms in the penitentiary, some of whom were in the prime of life, and some with gray heads and venerable-looking faces, were here employed in their nefarious work, and heaps of spurious coin and piles of counterfeit notes were daily prepared for circulation among honest citizens.

With this hidden retreat were two communications—one by an obscure path, which led up to the top of the cave, whence there was a descent into it by means of stairs and ladders—and the other by the waters of a small lake, that set back against the base of the surrounding hills, and to which a passage had been tunneled out from the interior.

A few parties in whom this community of criminal workers had confidence, were employed as runners between them and their world of foes; and these runners generally came and went in the night, mostly by water. To this vocation, as best calculated to serve the design I had in view, I aspired; and eventually—after several cautious trials, and the unanimous recommendation of the criminal dealers in the outer world, whom I had succeeded in making my friends—I received the

coveted appointment, and was duly initiated into all the mysteries of secret grips, passwords and signs.

Now I felt I had accomplished a great work, and had the villains comparatively in my power. That I should succeed in the arrest of the greater portion of them, I scarcely ventured to hope—for they were well armed, were desperate fellows, and in a position to successfully defend themselves against a large body of assailants—but that, through my secret workings, their whole establishment would be broken up and destroyed, and those who should escape be dispersed in a manner fatal to their unlawful purpose, for I had good reason to believe, and this was something that would secure me both fame and reward.

As a secret runner, going back and forth when I pleased, I had a fine opportunity to devise and carry out the plan that, among many others, I finally adopted. This was to give due notice to the authorities, and have a large, well-armed body of determined men secretly got together in that wild locality, and spread out, in a broad, connected circle, completely round the hills and lake, so as to intercept the villains in flight I expected they would make as soon as I should alarm them with the startling news of a large force marching upon them.

It was late in the fall of the year when I at last found myself going back to the villains' cave on a mission of so much danger as to shake my usually strong nerves and try my courage to the utmost. I had left the cave a week before, ostensibly to be absent a month; and now, in pursuance of my secret design, I was returning, to warn these desperadoes against a danger I had deliberately prepared for them. If detected, or even suspected of being a spy and informer, I knew I should not live long enough to say my prayers; and how could I know I had not been dogged and watched, as I had dogged and watched others? I hold it is the only true proof of a man's bravery, to show that he acted in the fear of death—for of a surety it requires no courage to meet what one does not fear—and, in view of this, I am not ashamed to confess that I secretly trembled for the result. I had a fond wife and loving children, and the idea that I might be untimely cut off and never behold them again, was terribly trying to my manhood.

I started to cross the lake in the last hours of darkness, that I might reach the cave and give my warning about the break of day, so that the villains would be compelled to depart in daylight, should they attempt an immediate flight. The lonely passage across the water, considering what was before me, was dismal enough, and I found little comfort or consolation in the fact that the whole locality was surrounded by men armed with deadly weapons and the authority of the law. It was late in the fall, as I have said, the trees had lost their leaves, the air was full of frost, and a chilling breeze cut across the dim, dark waters, making me shudder with cold as well as fear as I bent down to the oars and nervously pulled myself across.

It was not yet day when I reached the mouth of the tunnel leading into the cave. I was pale and excited; but this was a condition which might seem natural to the desperadoes on hearing my story, whether they should believe me guilty of betraying them or not; so I did not feel it necessary to change my look of alarm, or conceal my agitation.

Two sentries, guarding the mouth of the tunnel, challenged me; and as soon as I had answered correctly, giving the counter signs, grips and so forth, I added, hurriedly, in a suppressed tone of alarm:

“Terrible news!”

“What is it?” demanded both in a breath.

“Someone had betrayed us—has pointed out our secret retreat—and already a cordon of armed men is stretched around us, in a circle of miles, and they are closing in toward the centre to capture us! By accident I discovered this when more than a hundred miles away; and I have traveled night and day, and risked my life, to get back here and warn you all of your danger.

About half way down the tunnel there hung a gong against the wall, to be struck only in cases of great alarm and danger; and away we flew to sound this and communicate the fearful intelligence.

In less than fifteen minutes I was surrounded by a crowd of the most, wild, furious and terrified men I ever saw, all brawling and questioning me at once, each selfishly eager to save himself, without faith in, or regard for anyone else. As fast as I could, I made them comprehend the startling truth; and then, with bitter curses and maledictions, they, to my unspeakable relief, rushed away, to seize what they considered most valuable, their genuine money and their arms, and make their escape in the best manner they could, each man for himself.

Of the forty-seven who left that cave on that eventful morning, five were shot down in attempting to break through the sheriff’s lines and refusing to surrender, two were drowned, twenty-one were arrested, and the rest, it was supposed, got off clear.

But all their plates, dies, tools, presses, and machinery, were seized, their whole nefarious establishment destroyed, and their secret retreat broken up forever.

As for myself, I escaped with life, and received a reward from the different banks that in a pecuniary sense completely satisfied me for all the risk, anxiety and labor I had undergone in their behalf and that of the community at large. The affair in general terms made considerable noise in the papers of the time; but the facts, as here disclosed, I took care to have suppressed, so long as I considered myself in danger of assassination.

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