

Shoving the Queer

by Edward Kenneth

IN the ante-bellum days, before National Banks were heard of, or even thought of, the country was, at times, inundated with counterfeit money, both specie and bank notes, but more of the latter than of the former. There was scarcely a bank, North or South, but what had had at one time or another its issues of notes counterfeited, imitated, or “raised,” or its plates stolen from the engravers, from which were printed genuine notes, that were passed with forged signatures. Banks as well as individuals suffered severely from the manufacture and “shoving of the queer.”

It is on record that two large banks — one in New York, the other in Philadelphia — redeemed over their counters several hundred dollars of very excellent imitations of their own hundred-dollar notes. One bank in particular, in the city in which I resided, was always sure to get “stuck” with at least one of every counterfeit that made an appearance, and it was a standing joke with us clerks, when we heard of a new counterfeit, that we should certainly have a look at it, as the Consolidated Bank would be sure to have one in their package when they made their exchanges in the morning. Whether that bank sold its stock of the “queer “ to the junk dealer, or whether it was put into an elegant portfolio, marked “Engravings,” and placed carefully on the director's table for the inspection of the stockholders, we never knew.

I think that the best counterfeits I ever saw were some finely executed imitations of the twenty and one hundred dollar notes of the Clockburg Bank, of Connecticut. Such exact imitations were they, and so excellent was the work upon them, that more than one “expert” declared they were genuine notes “over issued” by the bank, and that the officers of the corporation knew more about the matter than they cared or dared to tell. Be that as it may, it was necessary for one institution in which I was interested, to charge to profit and loss, at the end of the year, about fifteen hundred dollars on account of these same twenties and hundreds of the Clockburg Bank.

As it may give to the uninitiated some idea of the methods pursued by the “shovers of the queer,” or passers of counterfeit money, in their nefarious game of swindling, I will relate what I saw in connection with the fifteen hundred dollars above mentioned. In 186- the Atlantic & Pacific Bank was a thriving institution in the busy city of R—. In connection with its regular banking business it acted as the “clearing house” for the other city banks. In order that the reader may more fully understand what is to follow, these facts should be borne in mind. First, all notes issued by banks outside the city of R—, with the exception of Boston and New York banks, were styled “country,” or “uncurrent money,” upon which the Atlantic & Pacific Bank charged the banks which made their exchanges with them a discount of thirty cents per thousand. Second, it was not customary for the Atlantic & Pacific Bank to receive country money from strangers.

At the time of which I write I was bookkeeper of the Atlantic & Pacific Bank. Ever since my promotion to that position it had been customary with me, whenever the work on my books would admit of it, to leave my desk for the purpose of assisting the money clerks in their treadmill labor. One day I had taken my usual place at the long table, and was trying to do my share of the counting. It was about half-past twelve, as near as I can remember. The cashier, first teller, and most of the clerks had gone to lunch. The bank seemed almost deserted. Not a

customer was in the lobby, and everything was quiet, save the monotonous ticking of the clock, and the tap, tap, tap of the remaining clerks as the bills flew through their fingers.

Suddenly the door opened, and a man walked across the marble floor of the lobby, and up to the second teller, who was the only one at the counter. At the noise I glanced up, and, sitting as I did directly opposite to where the man stood before one of the openings in the strong iron railing, that ran the whole length of the counter, I could not help but look him squarely in the face. He was, I should judge, about twenty-five years old, was of medium height, and rather slender, had a smooth face, and a small, light-colored mustache, and had on a brown soft hat, and linen duster buttoned to the throat. His manner was gentlemanly and unassuming. In a moment came his voice, clear, distinct, and deliberate.

“I have quite a large sum of Connecticut money with me, and, as there are so many counterfeits around, I would like to exchange it for something I know to be good.”

“We do not often exchange 'country money' for city, and never unless at a discount of thirty cents a thousand,” replied Mr. Williams, the second teller.

“Well,” hesitatingly from the stranger, as if he demurred at paying for the accommodation, “I don't know but I'd be willing to pay so small a discount, for I want to be certain that [I'm] carrying good money about with me.”

“How much Connecticut money have you?” queried Mr. Williams.

“I believe I have about thirteen hundred dollars in twenties and hundreds of the Clockburg Bank,” responded the stranger.

“Let me see it, and if it is all right I will exchange it for you at the discount named,” said Mr. Williams, and then and there the Clockburg-Bank notes changed hands.

The notes were carefully examined and counted by Mr. Williams, the amount as he stated being just thirteen hundred dollars.

Once more came the clear, deliberate tones of the man in the lobby.

“Please give me as clean bills as possible, and give me the whole amount in fives and tens, as I am going down to Berkshire to buy cattle.”

The stranger's modest request was politely acceded to, and twelve hundred and ninety-nine dollars in “clean bills” of the Atlantic & Pacific Bank, and sixty-one cents in change, were handed him. This he counted very calmly, as calmly placed in his pocket, and with a “Thank you,” and “Good day, sir,” sauntered out of the bank.

During the transaction I had more than once glanced at the man, that I might fix his features upon my mind, as I had actually become possessed of the idea that the notes might be counterfeit. Why I cannot tell. Was it intuition? or was it that vague warning which nature

sometimes gives to one's inner consciousness when danger is near, and yet none is apparent to the senses?

I cannot tell either why I did not at the time quietly call Mr. Williams aside, and warn him. But I had nothing to do with the counter, or the teller's department, and was not responsible for anything that occurred there. Even had I suggested that the notes might possibly be bogus, I should, perhaps, have been snubbed for my interference. I certainly would not have tolerated any suggestions from him in regard to my books, so I kept still, and let things take their course. When Mr. Landers, the first teller, came back from lunch, he appeared somewhat uneasy at the amount of "uncurrent money" taken during his absence, and questioned Mr. Williams in regard to it. Mr. Williams's reply I did not hear. In the meantime the business of the bank went on as usual, and that night the bills of the Clockburg Bank went to Boston for redemption.

The next forenoon, about ten o'clock, a messenger came into the bank with the following telegram: —

“SUSSEX BANK, BOSTON, June 8, 186-. “M. R. LANDERS, *Teller*,—

“Look out for twenties and hundreds of the Clockburg Bank.

“SWIFT, *Teller*.”

I turned on my stool, and looked at Mr. Williams. Naturally very pale, during the reading of the telegram his face was almost deathly white.

“By thunder!” he exclaimed, as he struck his thigh a resounding slap, “those bills were counterfeit!”

And so they proved to be. The clerks left their work, and in eager groups discussed the news; the cashier, Mr. Landers, and Mr. Williams retired to the directors' room, and the president of the bank and the chief of police were sent for. One by one the clerks, who were in the bank the day before, when the stranger made his appearance, were called into the directors' room, and questioned as to whether they would be able to recognize him again. Nearly all declared they did not think they would be able to tell “certainly,” but were satisfied that they “thought” they could. Mr. Williams, not having had the slightest suspicion of anything wrong, had taken no notice of the man, and was quite sure he would not know him again.

When my turn came to be questioned, I was so positive I should know the man, and gave so minute a description of him, that the president, turning to Chief Small said, —

“Mr. Harold will go with you to New York tonight. I am satisfied he remembers him, and if there is any one else you think it necessary to take you must use your own judgment. I put the whole matter into your hands, and you can draw on us for your expenses.”

How I acted, or what I said, at this speech, I hardly know, for I was young then, and this was my first visit to the metropolis. However, I believe I managed to say “All right, sir,” and went back

to my books with my mind filled with conflicting emotions. I was terribly sorry for Mr. Williams, for I had overheard the president tell him that he had “committed a very grave error of judgment,” and I knew how sensitive he was to anything that savored of fault-finding. I was also very sorry the bank had lost so much money, for it was pretty near the end of the quarter, and some of us had been hoping for an increase of salary; but all this was soon forgotten in the one thought that I was going to New York.

During the day Mr. Small, the chief, learned that a person answering the description, had, the night before, purchased a ticket for New York, and tendered in payment for the same a five-dollar note of the Atlantic & Pacific Bank. He had also ascertained that the teller of the Market Bank, Mr. James, had seen the party in question in the Ashton Bank, and was positive he could identify him, and Mr. James was to go to New York with us. This was good news to me, for, though I liked the chief well enough, Mr. James was a young man, and, therefore, more congenial company.

At last my work for the day was finished, and, with some parting words of caution and advice from the cashier, I went home to prepare for the momentous journey.

Punctual to the hour I was on hand at the depot, gripsack in hand, meeting there Mr. James and the chief. We arrived in New York at an early hour the next morning, and were driven immediately to the St. Nicholas Hotel, where we breakfasted. During our trip Mr. Small had informed James and myself that he should, if possible, secure the services of the well-known detectives, Messrs. Younger and McWood, of the regular force, after which, as there would be no further need of his services, he should return to R— .

Breakfast finished, we sat down in the hotel lobby to await the return of Mr. Small, who had gone to police headquarters on Mulberry Street, in quest of the detectives. He returned in about an hour, bringing with him Mr. Younger, a tall, dark, fine-looking gentleman, who appeared to me like anything but a detective. I think he might easily have passed himself off as a Baptist or Methodist clergyman.

I had, at the time, suspended from my watch chain, a charm in the shape of a large gold cross, and I was very much abashed when, after being introduced, Mr. Younger pointed to it, and said,—

“Young man, you are in New York on a special business; that won't do; too much show. You had better take it off.” It came off. “Now, young gentlemen,” he continued, “Mr. Small informs me that he has brought you here to identify the person — in case he is caught — who passed a large sum of counterfeit money in the city of R— . I know these notes, and they are some of the best imitations ever made. They cost the makers of them fifty cents for every dollar they issued. I know all the “shovers of the queer” in this city. If your man is here I shall have him. It is certain he came here after his big haul, but it is also quite certain that he has taken a wife, and gone up the river for a rest, where he will remain until this affair blows over. There was really no use in your coming, and not much in your staying here, but, as it is your first visit to New York, you had better stay a few days, have a good time, and see the 'elephant.' In the meantime I will give

you a little something to do, in order that you may keep up at least a semblance of work, so come with me.”

Chief Small's mission being accomplished, we shook hands with him, and requested he would report us “all right” on his return to R— .

“Now, boys,” re-commenced Mr. Younger, “draw close to me, and listen to every word I say. I am going to show you some of the worst haunts in the city, on the outside only, for it would not do under the circumstances, for me to go inside with you. You are to watch these places from the opposite side of the street for your man. Should you see him go into either of them, wait until he comes out, — never go inside, — then follow him until you see a policeman. Tell the policeman who and what you are, give him my card, and order him to arrest your man. Then report yourselves immediately at headquarters on Mulberry Street. In watching these places, which I shall point out to you, do not appear to be watching. Move about, talk, laugh, act as if you were merely passing away the time. Do not stand more than twenty minutes in one place. When you get tired go into the store on your side of the street, and have a chat with the proprietor.” Then, after a few moment's thought, he continued, “Should any of the frequenters of these places, or any person, approach and question you as to your business in that locality, be polite, and tell them you are in search of a sister, who has run away from home, and whom you are satisfied is somewhere in the vicinity. Well, here we are on Crosby Street, and that saloon over there, with the red lantern in front,” indicating it with a slight motion of his head, but never looking at it, “is the first place you are to watch.”

We walked down the street a short distance, turned back to Houston Street, where another crib was indicated, crossed Broadway, and entered a number of the streets back of the St. Nicholas, on each of which Mr. Younger called our attention to different buildings we were to have our eyes on. Arriving once more on Broadway, Mr. Younger bade us good-day, and that is the last we ever saw of the great New York detective. Mr. James and myself remained in the city a week, but it was of no use, and at the end of that time we returned to R— , with the proud consciousness that, although we were not successful in our errand, we had done our duty, and had a good time. The amount charged to profit and loss by the Atlantic & Pacific Bank was not far from fifteen hundred dollars.

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