

Old Sam

HOW A DETECTIVE FOUND HIM OUT

[From the Dark Side of New York Life]

People who live in the Bowery, or the vicinity of Hester street, New York, or who have had occasion to be much in that locality, will probably remember a hobbling old man, somewhat lame, and supporting himself on a thick stick, who was often to be seen there on Sundays, as well as week days, some two years ago. He was decently dressed, but was only known as "Old Sam." He was supposed to live New Jersey, but no one precisely knew. He was generally taken for a farmer, or for a resident in some little outlying place. People called him also "Lame Sam," and whoever heard his quiet mode of speaking and saw the friendly smile that was always lighting up his face, must have taken him for a very harmless man. And whoever met him on Sundays wending his way to church with a most devout aspect, must assuredly have thought that he was a very good old man, who was going thither out of pure piety.

But "Lame Sam" was very little of a saint; on the contrary, he was a most arrant scoundrel, who, to get money, was capable of any wickedness, and only went to church for bad motives. In everything he did he had a dishonest object in view; and, although he was generally considered as a good old man, he was, in truth, nothing else than a crafty, deceitful scoundrel, and the confederate of a notorious forger, burglar and safe thief named Crosby.

Sam had been running his evil course for some years, and had systematically circulated counterfeit currency wherever occasion had guided him in his wanderings; a proceeding which was easy enough to him with his seemingly honest face, and an aspect from which one would have thought that he could not say "boo to a goose." And fortune favored him so well and so long that he succeeded in accumulating a sum of money which enabled him to buy a fine farm in Quakertown, which brought him in a handsome return.

Sam was always at work, for the circulation of counterfeit money continued to remain his sole occupation. But he conducted this vile business so cautiously, so craftily, and under such a pious air, that it never occurred to anyone to take him for what he really was. And so, as he hobbled about from place to place, he was always the subject of a friendly good word, until one day the chief of the United States detective police, Colonel Whitney, conceived a suspicion against him, and thus the man who had for so many years been cheating people with false money began to be watched.

As before remarked, Sam always carried a stick, which, as he said, he could not do without, because he was so lame, that he therefore required a strong support. Wherever he was seen, wherever he went, sitting or standing, he had the stick constantly in his hand. He never let it go from him. But, one day, the thought occurred to the detective who was entrusted with the case, that there must be something more about that stick than at first appeared, and he determined to come at the truth of it. About that time there was a large number of counterfeit notes of various denominations in circulation in New Jersey, and down as far as Maryland. The detective officer,

working under the assumed name of Rugg, found out that Sam often paid visits in that direction.

So the officer scraped an acquaintance with Sam. At first, meeting him on the road, he would go with him, then he very soon took a journey on the railroad with him, and the two were constantly in bar-rooms and beer houses together. He drank and gossiped with him, and thus the acquaintance grew thicker; at last on one occasion Sam was observed to pass a counterfeit ten dollar bill in a hotel, and soon after to repeat the action in another house.

Now the officer went to work. Sam was traveling about in New Jersey, but Rugg was watching him unobserved; and, one day, just after Sam had come out of a hotel in a country place, the detective went in and asked whether Sam had spent any money there.

“Yes,” answered the landlord, “fifty cents. He is an old miser—never stays through the night.”

“What money did he give you?” asked Rugg.

“A ten-dollar note.”

“May I see it?”

“Yes, here it is,” answered the publican, taking the note out of the till.

“The note is bad,” Rugg quietly remarked.

“The devil it is,” cried the host.

“Nothing but a counterfeit, my friend! Not worth a cent.”

“Damn it!” shouted the publican, and he burst into a torrent of oaths. But Rugg whispered to him: “Now be quiet, friend, I am a detective. Leave the rest to me and take care of the note till I return.”

Upon this [Rugg] left him, and, going on the road after Sam, soon overtook him.

Sam had just come out of a store upon whose proprietor he had played a similar game.

“My daughter,” said he, as he went in, “asked me to get her three yards of calico. Have you anything good in that way?”

“Yes,” answered the storekeeper.

“How much is it a yard?”

“Twenty cents.”

“Is not that a little dear!”

“No, on the contrary, you will not get it as cheap anywhere else.”

“Well, then give me three yards.”

Sam took it; paid for it with another bogus ten-dollar bill, and left the store with his calico “for his daughter,” and nine dollars and forty cents of good money in his pocket.

Meanwhile Rugg had altered his dress, beard and hat so that Sam could not recognize him. He also, as he fell into Sam’s road, feigned to be somewhat intoxicated.

“How are you getting along, old fellow?” said Rugg, in a stammering voice. “Where are you going?”

Sam stopped. They gossiped for a little while, and then went together.

Rugg asked Sam what he had in his little parcel. “Calico for my daughter, which I have just bought in that store,” said Sam, looking backward at the place. Upon which Rugg suddenly remembered that he had to take some needles and thread to “old woman.” He took a good ten-dollar bill out of his pocket and asked Sam if he could not change it. Sam gladly seized such a good opportunity to do business, and he gave Rugg two counterfeit five-dollar bills, for, thought he, the fellow is drunk, he will not know a bad note from a good one.

Rugg now begged Sam to go to the store with him, then they would go on together; and, as they set off, Rugg noticed, as if for the first time, Sam’s stick.

“What a curious stick,” he stammered. And so saying, he took it out of Sam’s hand, looked at it on all sides and examined it to see if the large top unscrewed. It did; he screwed it off, and found that inside a string was fastened.

Sam was now on thorns, but he was a cunning fellow and knew how to control himself.

Rugg pulled out the string (which had a knot at the lower end) and out fell a little roll of bank notes. He pulled again; another little roll fell out, and then another, till altogether there were twelve rolls of five and ten dollar bills.

Rugg, who still pretended to be drunk, laughed aloud, apparently at the quantity of money he had pulled out; while Sam was confounded and hardly knew what to say.

“Hallo, you are rich, old fellow, very rich,” cried Rugg.

Sam collected his notes together again.

“Do you think they are good ones?” asked Sam, soon recovering himself.

Rugg looked at the notes and replied: "Yes, indeed, they are all good," while he had noticed a glance that they were all new counterfeits of the kind most recently put into circulation.

"It is curious," said Sam, "I have carried that stick more than twenty years. It belonged once to my father, who is dead, and I never in my life knew that the head would unscrew."

"Twenty years!" stammered Rugg; "and you have had it all the time?"

"Yes, —it has never been out of my possession."

"It seems to me," remarked Rugg, still feigning drunkenness, "that your notes were not printed at that time."

That was delicate question, but Sam went on as if he did not hear it; and when he had gathered together all his notes, he said, "You wanted to go and buy something in the store; let us go and do it, and then we will move along together."

"So we will," said Rugg, making an effort to stand on his legs.

So they went to the store. When they had entered, Rugg asked the store-keeper whether the old man bought any calico of him.

"Yes, about an hour ago," answered the store-keeper.

"And with what did he pay for it?"

"With this note," replied the man, showing Rugg the note he had received from Sam.

"It is a bad one," remarked Rugg quietly.

"Bad," cried Sam, "that is not possible. Then I will very soon take it back to the place I received it from. I am an old man and have not very good sight. Is not a shame to cheat an old man like that?"

Saying this, he wiped the tears from his eyes. Then he looked about in his pockets and brought out ten good one dollar bills and laid them down, apparently very much enraged at being cheated. He was on the point of going away, when Rugg, who now seemed to be sober again, asked him whether all his money was like this, which to him seemed closely to resemble that which he had in his stick, to which Sam replied: "Indeed, I cannot say, for my eyes are very bad."

"Now then," said Rugg, "let us go over to the hotel and have something to drink;" to which Sam agreed, although he wished Rugg at Jericho.

Arrived at the hotel, Rugg called the landlord on one side and asked for the ten-dollar bill which Sam had paid him. The landlord gave it, and Rugg at once said to him:

“Did this man give you this note?”

“Yes, he is the man who gave it to me.”

“What did you give him in change?”

“Nine dollars and a half.”

In a moment Rugg took Lame Sam by the collar and began to search him. First he found the publican’s nine and a half dollars; then his own ten-dollar bill, for which Sam had given him the two counterfeit five-dollar notes, and lastly he took \$400 in counterfeit notes from his stick.

“Where did you get these notes from?” asked Rugg, who was now quite sober. “I brought them from home. I went to see my sick daughter.” And Sam was going into a long explanation, but Rugg took off his hat and false beard, and said: “That is played out, I am a United States detective, and you, old rascal, are now my prisoner.” And at these words he slipped on the handcuffs, and, taking Sam to the railroad station, soon brought him to New York and before the chief. After a few words of conversation, Sam confessed that he bought the notes from a man named Crosby, a dealer in counterfeit money, and that for years he had been doing business by putting these notes in circulation in New York and the neighborhood, New Jersey and Maryland. Sam was prosecuted; he pleaded guilty and was sent four years to prison, where he now is.

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