

THE AFFAIR OF THE IRON POT

True Ties of the SECRET SERVICE By an Ex-Operative

EDITED BY WM. J. BACON

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"THERE are few mysteries which are never cleared up," commenced Captain Dickson, as we sat before the cheerful wood fire of his cozy study one night last winter, "although some of them slumber for years among the things forgotten, until the denouement is accidentally developed by some person who, perhaps never heard of the original matter. Such was the case which I have come to remember as that of 'The Iron Pot.' It was a vessel of this humble character that finally cleared up a great mystery and brought the guilty to justice.

"You are well aware that the silver dollar passes current for something like \$0 or 20 cents more than the actual silver in it is worth. This fact has not been overlooked by counterfeiters, and because of it the secret service has had some knotty problems to unravel.

"The largest percentage of counterfeiters of specie are crude, black, loathsome things that are readily detectable and difficult to pass. The handling of these coins is beset with excessive danger. But there have been some cases where counterfeiters have so perfectly imitated the silver dollar that experts have been deceived by it. Such a coin was brought out by a gang operating in St. Louis some years ago. Their dollar was of the same fineness and weight as the coin of the Government's mint and had the same quantity of alloy. The only difference between the two was that the counterfeit dollar was a shade thicker than the genuine, which fact was due to the machinery of the counterfeiters being somewhat lighter and less powerful than that of the Federal mints.

"The popular idea that coins are cast or molded is quite erroneous. They are stamped or pressed out of narrow strips of metal. It is only by this means that they can be sufficiently compressed to stand the wear to which they are subjected in circulation. The machines used for this purpose are heavy, ponderous things, and it is difficult for counterfeiters to secure the manufacture of such a machine and quite as hard a proposition for them to find a suitably secret place in which to operate it, once they have got it made.

"The St. Louis gang had their plant in a cleverly constructed cave in a suburban district. It was an artificial cave dug back in the face of a clay and gravel bluff. The entrance was through the shanty of a poor Irish family, a circumstance that diverted suspicion from it and one in which is hardly due the long immunity the gang enjoyed.

"It is not necessary to detail the long and tedious work it took to locate the cave, for that is a story told to lead up to the matter of the iron pot. At any rate, when we descended upon the shanty and explored the cave, we found nothing more than a contraband one, as far as anything we found would indicate. The only fact that tended to point to its real use was that it was hidden away in such a suspicious place.

"There was no scrap of metal, no coins, chemicals, or other thing used in the art. Only the machine and a few wrenches and similar tools. The gang had shipped out. The Irishman was half-witted, and his wife was too stupid to be caught in the traps we laid for her. We had made a water-haul, except for the machine, which was destroyed. The cave was filled up. Acting under orders from Washington we maintained secrecy about the entire matter and nothing of it got into the newspapers.

"I found one thing in the shanty which might have offered a clue to the counterfeiters. It was an empty envelope bearing the postmark of an obscure railroad station in the smokeland district of Northeastern Arkansas. I had long ago learned that it is the seemingly insignificant things that lead to the discovery of criminals, and while this envelope might mean nothing to the other hand, it might be of the gravest importance. It had been found beneath the sheet of metal on which the cook stove stood, the tip of whose ear extended and springy, attracting my attention. I had secured it and pocketed it without attracting attention.

"If the gang had never existed it could not have disappeared so effectively. We were face to face with a blank wall. This made us the more anxious to capture the counterfeiters. As nothing better offered, the chief suggested that I follow up the clue of the empty envelope.

"With as cumbersome and complete an outfit as every city sportsman carries I had to make a long and arduous journey one day at the wayside station which bore the name of the postmark. Securing a guide and cook, in the person of a lanky native, I had my tent pitched on the banks of the Francis River, only two miles distant, where I pitched camp and made preparations for an indefinite stay.

"It was the greatest game country I have ever seen. There were deer without limit and a good sprinkling of turkeys, some bears, and water fowl of every kind, until the killing of them lost their value, which I distributed with lavish hand. It gave me the opportunity for which I was playing.

"By making inquiry of my visitors I learned that about five miles down the river were camped, in a snug cabin built by themselves, three gentlemen from parts unknown. They maintained the place as a sort of club and had spent the Spring season there. They left about March and were gone until October, when they returned one night and again took possession of their cabin. Our raid on the cave had been made on October 15, and this caused me to think that perhaps the empty envelope was making good.

"The three gentlemen did not deign to visit my camp, I decided to make a call upon them.

"I started out in a folding canvas canoe, late in the afternoon, and arrived in the vicinity of their cabin at nightfall. With a sharp cypress tree, aided by a jagged cut from my hunting knife, I succeeded in punching a hole in the side of the canoe. Every minute the water rapidly filling with water, I landed just before sunset at the very door of their cabin. The three men were at home and they were used to my kind of visit.

"I had a plentiful supply of liquors and cigars, a fact my guide lost no time in spreading broadcast about the country. This was just what I wanted him to do, for it brought the natives flocking to my camp to partake of the liquors and cigars which I distributed with lavish hand. It gave me the opportunity for which I was playing.

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disclose the counterfeiter, if the observer is only sufficiently versed in their ways and mannerisms to recognize the telltale signs. I was pretty sure, before the evening was over, that these were the men who had done the job in St. Louis.

"Nothing about the cabin was the least suspicious. A large iron pot bubbled invitingly over the open fire, and how much I'm salting away in the fragrant odor of boiling meat issuing from under its lid when the steam pushed it up on one side. A steaming haunch of venison, cooking with some vegetables and dumplings, was produced from the pot for our supper, which was served soon after my arrival. In the center of the room was a big table,

crudely constructed of heavy oak timbers. The cabin was well lighted, the lamps being of expensive character and great brilliancy. Guns and fishing tackle and hunting tongs of every kind gave the cabin the atmosphere of a sportsman's den.

"The men talked freely of everything but themselves. They spoke of many cities, but never of their homes. They told me they were college chums who had always made it a custom to spend a few months together each Fall in the woods. They were clever men and readily passed for the lawyer, the doctor and the merchant, the characters they respectively pretended to be. The one to whom the other two deferred in everything was a large, powerful man with clean-shaven face and jaw like a bulldog. His face was now alight with pleasure. He watched me furtively, a sinister, amused smile playing about the corners of his mobile mouth. That smile spoke volumes. It made me lie awake all night. It seemed to say that he knew my real character and therefore I thought it best to keep on the watch. The man seemed capable of offering me personal advice about my business, but I was away without incident. After breakfast I repaired the leak in my canoe and paddled slowly upstream, trying to figure out the first thing the night passed with the square jaw before.

"While I was smoking a last cigar before retiring that evening, it came to me where I had seen him. It was a characteristic of the night, on one occasion when I was shadowing the shanty at the cave. He had been on the same car and had kept his seat when I alighted there. He had looked at me as I went, and I had not seen him since. I was sure that he was one of the counterfeiters and made up my mind to arrest the three of them the first thing next morning.

"Here I learned a lesson in procrastination. While I hastily gobbled down my breakfast the next day, a trapper, who camped near by and who had gone to the village the night before for supplies, happened along and told me a most disconcerting bit of news. The three men had taken French leave. They had caught a through freight about midnight, taking little or no baggage with them. I hastened to the village, and although I worked the single telegraph wire to its utmost capacity, the three men succeeded in making their escape.

"Sending a full cipher report to Washington, I repaired to the cabin in the morning and made a careful search of it. Everything within was in the greatest confusion. Clothing and shells guns and fishing-tackle were strewn about the floor, evidencing a precipitate departure. It was tantalizing again to allow the criminals to escape. I felt deeply chagrined, and dumplings, was produced from the pot for our supper, which was served soon after my arrival. In the center of the room was a big table,

"In one corner of the cabin, beneath the very bunk on which I had slept, there was an excavation three feet square and as many deep. The cover was down and dirt was strewn over it which hid the same appearance as the dirt floor of the house. I discovered it by a hollow sound when I tapped over the spot. It was empty.

"I noticed the absence of the pot which had supplied my supper, but it was rather a subconscious notice of it. The fact really made no appreciable impression on me at the time, nor did it, in fact, until more than a year had passed. It was then recalled by a newspaper dispatch under date of the small village.

"Some of the boys in the village had appropriated the cabin as a sort of clubhouse, after the three men had struck their tent. Saturday there, fishing and swimming and hunting. Immediately in front of the cabin was a steep bank, and the river widened and deepened. The boys would throw white pebbles into this hole and dive for them from the bank and out of them had struck his head against something hard at the bottom of the river and had been pulled up a corpse, his skull having been fractured by the impact of the blow.

"The others investigated and found a large iron pot half buried in the soft mud. Its cover was sealed down and its weight had been so great that the boys could lift it from its oozy bed. The dispatch stated that the pot was to be raised and its contents examined. Then it was in Little Rock when I read this dispatch and, without waiting for instructions from headquarters, I boarded the first train and set out for the village. I was in a state of feverish excitement, fearing I would arrive there after the pot had been secured. I wanted to be the first to view the contents. I felt sure I knew what was in it.

"After a journey that seemed interminable I arrived at the village and inquired about the pot. My former business grounds. With the indifference so characteristic of country people the villagers had forgotten, after the funeral of the unfortunate young man, the incident of the pot. While there had been some talk of raising it, no one had taken the lead, and there the matter had rested.

"Securing a team of mules and some strong ropes and chains, I drove out to the cabin. By dint of much diving I succeeded in fastening the chains about the pot and had my assistants assist me in pulling it up. It was the vessel which had hung over the fire when I had visited the counterfeiters in their lair. Then I remembered its absence, when I had searched the hut after my departure. It was sealed with paraffin and sealing wax, and not a drop of water had passed the lid.

"It contained a complete set of engravers' tools, several bottles of powerful acids, glass stoppers and several number of bars of silver, some 20-odd counterfeit silver dollars, and the dies with which they had been stamped with wax, and were as bright and fresh as when they beat out the false coins in the secret cave.

"After awaiting my assistant to see me, I returned to headquarters with my booty.

"Not many weeks later two of the men were captured. I had given the department a minute description of them, after their unceremonious departure, and the great machinery had been set in motion for their apprehension. It is a maxim of the service that a man once a counterfeiter is always a counterfeiter. This rule has been good with reference to two of the men, at least, for they were captured and convicted of another job. The incidents I have just related were not introduced in evidence against them and consequently escaped the press. The man with the bulldog jaw escaped completely at that time, but I met with him years ago in my own circumstances. Neither of us will forget so long as we live."

"(Next week Capt. Dickson will relate the story of 'The Affair of the Panama Hat'.)

"It will be your turn next," says the old boy, muttering me to go on the side track.

"Say, you can judge the state I was in from singin' them hymns when I make a break like that. Honest, if he hadn't stopped me, I'd soon be on to tell the man things I never done. He meant to do. The old gent had the most catchin' kind of pioussness I ever run against. The wreck feels it too, and as soon as he gets a show he loosens up.

"It's apples," says he. "I stole apples."

"What a jan! 'Apples' says I. 'G'wan! if you can't dig up anything worse than singin' an' eatin' apples, you'd better quit. Ah, take another thinkin'!"

But old Dayton wouldn't have it that way. Says he, "It's a sin to steal a pin. It's my young friend."

And our young friend was more than willin'. He says his name is Alfred Marston Boggs, and that he was studyin' to go to college. He says he's been in his vacation gettin' subscriptions for a glucose factory that turns out home made preserves, tryin' to make enough to pay his board during the next term. But he'd run up against it good and hard. Alfie finds the subscription business overdone, and in the territory he strikes all the women put up their own strawwires and canned peaches.

He'd got as far as Albany, and was workin' his way down the river, when his last dollar gets away from him. First off he eats his jam samples, which gives him the colicky blues so he has to lay off for two days and sends his agent's copy of the "Life" for lodgin' at a third-rate hotel. That leaves him all in a heap at the foot of the sildin' board, with a 30-mile walk between him and the nearest place where his trunk was good.

Alfie has stuck it out for nearly a day, acquirin' an appetite like a sausage mill, when he strikes one of them big estates up along the river. He says he's found a place where his trunk was good. There was a high iron fence with spikes on top, just purpose to keep folks out; but our young friend has a shavin' sensation that won't behave, so over he climbs.

"It was terrible," says Alfie. "He said I was a common thief, and that he was goin' to have me put in jail and then let me out. I don't know what made me do it."

SHORTY MCKABE'S ACCOUNT OF A MIX-UP WITH A PLUTE WHO WAS DODGING THE PROCESS SERVER

"I was sayin' to Swiftly Joe, 'Swiftly,' says I, 'did it ever strike you that every garden has its lemon tree?'"

"Ain't that?" says Swiftly. "All the hand organs is playin' that tune. Ring out!"

But say, what's the use wastin' high art conversation on a cocoanut head like that? So I don't tell him what happens out to Primrose Park on a wet Sunday. You see, when I goes up on Saturday night I was lookin' for another dry shiner, but I guess I must have read the signs wrong, for when I wakes up in the mornin' the rain is comin' down slantwise and plenty, and the lawn is lookin' as soggy as the under crust of a huckleberry pie.

It sure seems like an all day session with my heels up on the rail and nothin' doin' but read the papers and as well as for a contraband one, as far as anything we found would indicate. The only fact that tended to point to its real use was that it was hidden away in such a suspicious place.

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