



STORIES OF THE SECRET SERVICE

BY Capt. Patrick D. Tyrrell

STORY No. 5

The Boscobel Koniackers

Being an Account of the Capture and Conviction of the Band of Counterfeiters Operating in Wisconsin in 1878.

By CAPTAIN PATRICK D. TYRRELL

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It was one day in the early spring of the year 1878 that a young man signing the application form as "George C. King, No. 873 West Adams street, Chicago, Ill.," appeared at the money-order window of the Chicago post office and asked for two money orders aggregating \$75 in amount, payable to A. J. Williams, of Canandaigua, N. Y. With the application he handed the clerk a \$100 note. The clerk made out the orders, gave them and \$25 to the applicant and the latter disappeared. The same day, in counting the cash received at the money order window, the chief clerk encountered the \$100 note and became suspicious of its genuineness. It purported to be a note of the issue of the Revere national bank, of Boston.

Being notified that such a note had been received at the post office, I immediately made an examination of it and pronounced it a counterfeit. I then took possession of the note and submitted it to Fred M. Blount, who was then cashier in the United States treasury in Chicago, asking him to place the government "counterfeit" stamp on it. This he refused to do on the ground that the note, in his opinion, was genuine. I pointed out many discrepancies between the note in hand and one known to be genuine, but Blount claimed he had frequently noticed discrepancies as great between two genuine notes of the same issue.

On his refusal to stamp the note I took it to Thomas P. Tallman, cashier of the Traders' national bank, whom I considered the most reliable expert in such matters in any of the city banks. Mr. Tallman spent two hours making a minute examination of the note, and at the end of that time concurred in my original opinion that the note was counterfeit. Having been thoroughly satisfied in my own mind from the beginning the note was spurious, I deemed it important to trace it. From the post office records the name and address given by the passer of the note were secured, and these were found to be correct.

King was not at home when I called at his house, but from his wife I learned he had received a \$100 bill from A. J. Williams, a friend of her husband's in Canandaigua, N. Y. The passing of the bill had been noted in my daily report to Chief Brooks in Washington, and as soon as I learned that the note had been received from the same man to whom the money orders purchased with it had been sent, I suggested that the eastern division of the secret service take up the New York end of the chain.

The following day I arrested King at the La Salle street offices in which he was employed and found in his possession a letter from his Canandaigua friend. The letter itself was an innocent, friendly missive, but in the envelope was a separate note instructing King to buy the money orders, keep \$25 for himself and to "keep his own counsel." In my mind there was no reasonable doubt that Williams, who was a jeweler, and King at least had guilty knowledge that the note in question was counterfeit.

In glancing back over a long line of records for the years 1878 and 1879, I select the foregoing incident as the first thread the secret service picked up in the skein of events which afterward connected east and west in a gigantic "koniacking" swindle that reached into the United States treasury building itself, and I set it forth here merely on account of what it suggested rather than on account of its intrinsic importance.

At the present day, when the counterfeiting of the nation's money is rapidly passing into the category of lost arts, the younger generation will wonder at the extent of counterfeiting a third of a century ago as indicated by the narratives I have told and the one I am about to relate. And it there be any wonder on this score there will be no wonder when I say that Nelson Driggs,

Ben Boyd, Fred Biebusch, "Pete" McCartney and a score of others already mentioned were members of the western contingent only, while in the east was a corresponding number just as skilled and just as active.

The connections between east and west crossed and interlaced, until they formed a figurative free-masonry of counterfeiting reaching from ocean to ocean and from Canada to the gulf. For this condition there was a most obvious explanation. We whose hairs are gray will remember when the necessities of government during the war of the rebellion compelled the issue of hundreds of millions of legal tender of new and various kinds. These issues were made hastily, being demanded by the exigencies of the kaleidoscopic financial situation, and were imperfect to an extent that would now be considered ridiculous.

Much of the new currency issued during the war and the existence of the state banks was not only defective in the engraving, but was printed on paper which could be easily duplicated by a clever chemist. Scrip was in use, and the government product, from the engraver's standpoint, was not of a high character. In short, the large spawn of "koniackers" that did so much unlawfully to inflate the currency of the country from 1850 to 1880 were bred by temptation arising from defective national currency—defective from the artisan's viewpoint.

The eastern and western crowds operated largely each for itself without the help of the other, but the resources of the east were drawn on when the western counterfeiters needed a new plate or material not obtainable in their own bailiwick, and the easterners frequently came west for similar accommodations. "Coney" floated in the east was frequently traced to the Mississippi valley or farther west, and some of the most troublesome imitations we ever had to deal with in the west were the handiwork of eastern artisans. With this explanation I will take up another thread in the story of "The Boscobel Koniackers."

Some time before my story opens A. L. Drummond, chief secret service operative in charge of the New York division, had run across plates for the manufacture of scrip which he had traced to the hand of Kale Ellis, a western product, and as desperate a



"LIE BACK, OR I'LL KILL YOU!"

counterfeiter as ever dodged the secret service. Drummond and W. W. Kennoch, another operative, both had been sailors, and, through furnishing information to the revenue officers concerning certain smuggling operations, had been appointed customs officers in New York. From this work they went into the secret service.

Woods was then chief of the service and had sent Drummond to Wisconsin to hunt down Ellis, the maker of the scrip plate. Drummond caught up with his man and Ellis fled, with the secret service officer in close pursuit. The counterfeiter ran to the Pecatonica river, plunged in and swam to the other bank. Drummond, seeing his man escaping, fired at him in midstream, one of the bullets clipping away the lobe of Ellis' right ear, making a mark of identification that became known to every man in the secret service.

In his flight Ellis had carried with him the plates from which the scrip was being made, and knowing he could not be convicted unless the plates were found in his possession, he dropped the package in the river as he swam for his life. With remarkable presence of mind, while bullets from the officer's revolver were clipping the water all around him, Ellis mentally took such accurate bearings of the spot at which he dropped the package that he was able afterward to recover it.

He reached the opposite bank exhausted. Drummond followed him over and searched him, but found him "clean"—that is, without tangible evidence of his guilt in his possession. Aware he could not make a case that would hold in court against Ellis, Drummond let him go, but not until the counterfeiter had delivered this message for the benefit of all of us:

"If any secret service man ever again tries to take me I'll kill him on sight."

Ellis was known throughout the service as a man of great determination and disregard of consequences when it came to keeping his skin whole, and his sworn threat to Drummond made him a man to be feared unless we took him unawares. I was comparatively young in the service then and very ambitious. I decided that Ellis was in my territory, and as he was a particularly dangerous customer, besides having escaped from one of the best operatives in the department, it would be much to my credit if I captured him, and at the same time would rid the public of a sagacious counterfeiter.

By systematic "piping" and the use of "stool pigeons" I learned in the early part of 1875 that Ellis was one of a band of "coney" men who were running off a big issue of scrip in the town of Boscobel, in the central western part of Wisconsin.

Despite the studied and artful secrecy of the counterfeiters it is true that seldom was a big issue of "coney" floated without the secret service having some intimation of the forthcoming event. The "shoving" of an issue was always preceded by the absolute retirement of the manufacturers and the mysterious activity on the part of the dealers. In other words, the coming event got into the wind, and, while we may have had no definite knowledge whatever, we could scent the approaching issue in cases by keeping in touch with the different men who were always under suspicion. In this case it was learned that Napoleon B. Latta, a wealthy French farmer living 15 miles from Boscobel, had contracted with the Ellis crowd for all the "coney" they could furnish him of a certain standard of excellence. We even got so far into the secrets of the "coney" men as to learn that Latta was to pay 35 cents in genuine money for each dollar of representative currency, which, by the way, was an unusually high price, as the market quotation in those days for a good quality of "coney" was 17 cents on the dollar.

In the spring of 1878, therefore, I went to Boscobel. Registering at the hotel under a false name and from a small town in Missouri, I kept pretty much to myself and out of sight. In order to keep the landlord from becoming inquisitive, as the landlords of hotels in small towns are prone to do, I asked him a number of questions concerning the opportunity for successfully loaning money on farms in the vicinity. These questions had the desired effect of preventing others from asking me questions which I might arouse suspicion by not answering.

In the engraving department of the United States government there is an elaborate system of screens, reflectors and shades by which is obtained the peculiar soft light necessary to the engraving of plates from which currency is printed. By counterfeiters this system must be imitated as closely as limited facilities will permit, and I believe to this day I could pick out any house in which counterfeiting was be-

ing carried on in any town of such size as would allow an inspection of all the houses. Boscobel was not so large but that it was easy to locate the rendezvous of the counterfeiters. As usual it was on the outskirts of the town and its nearest neighbor was 100 yards away. There was but one house beyond it on the street. The house was a two-story frame structure. The peculiar arrangement of the curtains on the second floor told the tale without any other information. Malcolm Robinson and his wife occupied the house by themselves, according to the belief of the townspeople. The facts were, however, as revealed by investigation, that Robinson and his wife occupied the lower story and Kale Ellis and Franklin J. Brown the upper story. The three men were counterfeiters. Robinson was the "manufacturer" of the Boscobel crowd, Brown being the printer under Robinson's direction. Ellis was the engraver, as I have previously told, but at that particular time he was also aiding in the work of running off the issue for the use of "Nap" Latta.

Brown and Ellis seldom went down stairs, and were never seen by the neighbors, their meals being served them upstairs by Mrs. Robinson. The little exercise they got was taken under cover of the night. The life of the counterfeiter at his busy times is not a bed of roses, by any means, for it requires the utmost concentration and application of effort. The longer the delay in producing an issue the greater danger of discovery, and such a task, once begun, is followed with tremendous diligence until the output is in the hands of the dealer and the genuine coin of the realm safely in the hands of the manufacturers of the "coney."

I took some time to satisfy myself as to the exact conditions prevailing in and around the Robinson residence. I had not forgotten Kale Ellis' little pleasantry in regard to the probable fate of any secret service man who attempted to capture him, and I did not intend to take any more chances than necessary when it came to planning for the event. But the time soon came when it seemed certain no mistake could be made in raiding the Robinson house.

[To Be Continued.]

Misfits.
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Jill—Breaches.—Yonkers Statesman.

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