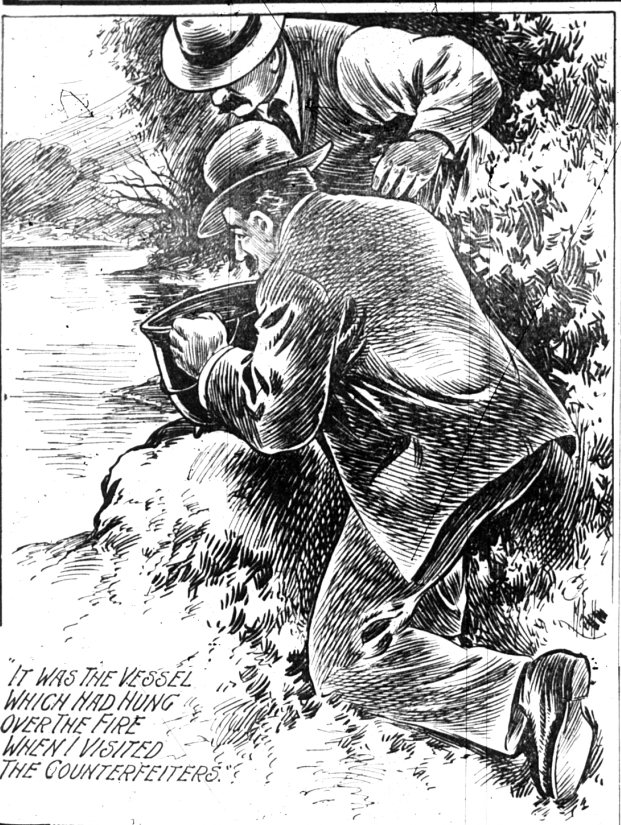


The Iron Pot in a Mystery

By a Former Secret Service Man

Ex-Operative Tells of Cleverest of Counterfeiting Plots

Clinton Dickson Relates Tale—He Tells of Encountering Desperado Gang and the Ultimate Consequences—Man with Bulldog Jaw and His Daring Escape from the Grip of the Law.



IT WAS THE VESSEL WHICH HAD HUNG OVER THE FIRE WHEN VISITED THE COUNTERFEITERS

THEIR are few mysteries which are more cleverly concealed than the one which I am about to tell you. It was a mystery which I have never before 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 kind which 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 49 or 50 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, cheap 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 mint and had the same quantity of alloy. The only difference between the two was that the spurious coin 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 by 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 set up 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 a simple, unobtrusive affair, and the interior was a roomy, well-lighted place. The gang consisted of about a dozen men, and they were all well-to-do looking fellows. They were all dressed in the latest fashion, and they all had a certain air of refinement about them. They were all well-to-do looking fellows. They were all dressed in the latest fashion, and they all had a certain air of refinement about them.

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(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 swamp and made a careful search of it. Everything within was in the greatest confusion. Clothing and silver, guns and fishing tackle were strewn about the floor, evidencing a precipitate departure. It was tantalizing to again allow the criminals to escape, but I thought of the man with the bulldog jaw, and I resolved never again to put off a matter of this kind. The men had foretold me by only a few hours, for I had in my mind a certain number of men, and there had been nothing in their conduct during my visit to their cabin to indicate that they thought of flight. In one corner of the cabin, beneath the very bunk on which I had slept, there was an excavation three feet square, and in it I had been looking down and dirt was strewn over it which was of 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 satisfactory notice of it. The fact really made no appreciable impression on me at the time, nor did it, in fact, until about a year had passed. It was then, through the newspaper dispatch under date of the small village.

"One of the boys in the village had appropriated the cabin as a sort of clubhouse. After the men had fled, they would spend Saturday afternoon fishing and swimming and hunting. Immediately in front of the cabin was a steep bank, and the river widened out into a broad, deep pool which afforded good fishing and swimming. The boys would throw white pebbles into this hole and dive for them, from the bank, and they would strike his head against the stone, and he 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. The pot was of the same kind as I had seen in the swamp, and its weight had been so great the boys could not lift it from its oozy bed. The dispatch stated that the pot was to be raised, and it was accordingly done.

"I was in Little Rock when I read this dispatch, and without waiting for instructions from headquarters, I started for the village. I was in a state of feverish excitement, fearful I would arrive too late to see the pot, and I was determined to be the first to view its 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 fears had been groundless. With the indifference of a man who has seen a great many things, the villagers had forgotten, after the funeral of the unfortunate young man, the incident of the pot. I had been told some tales of raising it, but no one had taken the lead, and there the matter had rested.

"While I was waiting for 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 in pulling it out. I dragged it out upon the bank. It was the vessel which had hung over the fire when I had visited the counterfeiters in their cave. The pot was empty, and I had searched the bottom, after their departure. It was sealed with wax, and I had broken it, but not a drop of water had passed the lid.

"I contained a parcel of silver dollars, several bottles of powerful acids, glass stopped and sealed, a number of bars of silver, some three hundred odd counterfeit silver dollars, and the dies with which they had been struck. The dies were coated with wax and when they were brought fresh as when they were used to strike the coins in the secret cave.

"After I had viewed my assistant to secrecy, I returned to headquarters with my booty.

"Not many weeks later two of the men were captured. I had my department a minute description of them, after their unceremonious departure, and my vast 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. The rule holds 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 my mind was not at rest. I was determined to arrest the three of them the first thing next morning.

"I heard 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 tried to throw me a bait about midnight, taking little time and buzzed with me. I hastened to the

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