

TRUE DETECTIVE STORIES

THE CAPTURE OF "GOPHER BILL,"

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"I Went to See Him, Nevertheless"



"What Do You Mean by Sending Such a Letter Through the Mail?"

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IN the language of thieves, a safe is a "gopher." For more than thirty years William H. Robinson worked exclusively as a bank burglar. Hence the name, "Gopher Bill," which was bestowed upon him by his friends in the community.

As long as Gopher's eyesight was good and his muscles limber, nothing looked so good to him as a bank vault. But there came a day when he could no longer scale an iron fence at a bound nor pull a drill with security. And on that day he began to do what any other moneyless old man must do—pick up odd jobs. But Gopher's lesser tasks were like his greater ones—gratifying. He peddled counterfeit money, ran errands for the friends who happened to be in jail, and sometimes went through a house if the windows were low, unlocked, and he was sure no one was at home.

I remember a particular occasion when Gopher, in making \$2 for himself, made an enormous amount of trouble for others. While I was in charge of the Philadelphia division of the Secret Service, one companion of Gopher came into my office one day and told me he had some news. He said he had seen the old man in a key store buying keys. He questioned him and learned that he intended to take the keys to the Newcastle (Delaware) prison and give them to "Big Frank" McCoy, who was serving time for the robbery of a bank in Wilmington. Gopher told my informant that he was going to run over with the keys the next morning and that on the night of the same day "Big Frank" would walk out of the same jail.

McCoy had walked out once before while serving the same sentence, and I knew the information was more than likely to be correct. So I wrote to the Warden and telegraphed the postmaster at Wilmington a request to deliver the letter in person immediately after his arrival.

Two days later I was surprised to read in the morning newspapers that "Big Frank" had escaped from the Newcastle prison the night Gopher said he would go. I was astounded. My letters would have reached the warden in plenty of time to warn him, and in my telegram to the Postmaster I had told him of McCoy's plans to escape. So I wrote to Wilmington to find out what was the matter.

"Did you get a telegram from me two days ago?" I asked the Postmaster.

"Yes."

"Did you receive the letter for the warden?"

"Oh, yes," he replied, "and I delivered it to him personally."

Then I went to see the warden.

"Did you get a letter from me?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, "but when the Postmaster delivered it to me I was busy at something else, put it in my pocket and did not find it until to-day."

"Things didn't look right to me, and after I returned to Philadelphia I sent to Washington for a copy of the report in which I advocated further investigation. In this I was overruled, on the ground that the matter concerned the State of Delaware rather than the United States. "Big Frank" was never captured and Gopher was left to the peaceful enjoyment of his \$2.

In 1910, however, the old man conceived an idea that came to him in the penitentiary. I hadn't seen him for months when one day a letter came asking me to go to see him. I knew he never wanted to see me again, but I got so much out of it that I went, as I also knew he could not be believed under oath. I went to see him, nevertheless, intending to listen to what he said and investigate any statements that might seem to be important.

"Mr. Drummond," said he, "a rich old farmer from Hopewell, Pa., is coming in here to-morrow to buy some new tools. I will point him out to you on the street if you want me to, and you can 'whisk him down' for \$5,000. But you must give me half of it."

I may remark, parenthetically, that the "shake down" a counterfeit money buyer is to arrest him and then take good money for turning him loose.

I asked Bill how he knew the money was coming. Something in the way I asked the question, perhaps, made the old man suspect that I doubted the correctness of his story, and he set upon accusing my assistance in the task of shaking down the Pennsylvania farmer, and he at once set forth to prove to me the reliability of his story.

"Did you know old Jim Rogers?" he asked.

"I did when he was alive," said I. "I know he used to deal in counterfeit money."

"Well, old Jim was a great friend of mine, and when he was about to die he sent for me. He was lying in bed, hardly able to talk above a whisper, but when I set down beside him he put his hand out from under the covers and clasped mine. He said, 'You've always been on the square with me, and now now I am about to die I want to will you my business. As you know, I've got a lot of customers for counterfeit money all over Pennsylvania. When they want any stuff they write to me. Part of them know me by my own name and send their letters in care of a saloon in Filbert street. The others know me as Jim Martin and send their orders in care of another saloon. I want you to have all of this business now, Gopher. Go to these saloons, get my mail and fill the orders yourself!'"

"By good right, you see, I should have had all of old Jim's business—but I haven't had it. One of the saloons has held out on me. The fellow who runs it has kept all the letters and sold the counterfeit himself. That's how I know this Pennsylvania farmer is coming. I've got a card that he wrote to the other place and made arrangements for."

All the while that Gopher was telling me this story the thought was running through my mind, "I'll catch Gopher and the saloon keeper now—get them dead to rights, and put both of them in the penitentiary!" However, when he had finished speaking I only said to him—

"I'll have a man meet you to-morrow at any place you say, Bill, and we'll arrest the farmer. I'll not go myself, because all of the counterfeit money people know me too well. I've got a very clever negro on my staff."

Gopher thought the negro idea was a good one. I had no color man at work under me, but I felt that I might have a man meet me to-morrow at any place I trap for me I could get a white man up close to him while he was looking for a negro.

"Did I want this understood before we go any further?" I continued. "I shall try to get the farmer to tell from whom he bought the counterfeit, and if he does it I'll put that man in the penitentiary. If he refuses I'll put the farmer himself in the penitentiary."

"Then I'll not point out the man to you," said Gopher, and further negotiations were off, as I expected they would be.

When I went back to the office I wrote a letter to the chief of the service asking him to send W. W. Hines, of the Philadelphia office, to an order from me, which was done. Then I wrote to J. A. Bates, a police official of Stanton, asking his co-operation. And to both Hines and Bates I forwarded the draft of a letter, which I asked them to copy and mail one letter to be directed to Jim Rogers and the other to Jim Martin. The letter was as follows—

"Friend Hines—I expect to be down to the city next week. I wish you would let me know whether you have any high grade stuff, either paper or silver. I would be glad to get a little if it's the kind I want."

The letter was copied and sent, Hain signing his name as "James Powers," and directing it to Jim Rogers, and Bates signing his letter "William Stark," and directing it to Jim Martin.

In each instance a reply was received almost by return of mail. Bates received a letter from old Gopher Bill himself, as I knew from the handwriting. Bill, however, merely told his correspondent to come and see him when he reached Philadelphia.

His letter was answered by a man whom I shall call Moran, since I understand he is now leading a comparatively decent life and has reputable relations. Of course, Moran signed the name of Rogers, but I knew who he was. In his reply he was as frank and outspoken as Gopher was guarded, describing his goods as free as might a legitimate merchant, and urging Hain to come down and make a deal.

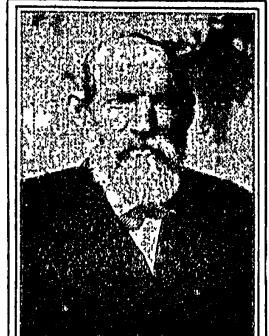
declared they knew well, was tall and lean, while the man who came to deal in his name was the opposite. Bates carried out his instructions to the letter. Playing the part of a sceptical old farmer, he refused for some time to do business at all. Bill at first attempted to reassure him with general statements, and finally told the story of how old Jim had died and willed him his customers. This explanation satisfied Bates and he bought two hundred trade dollars.

In the case of Moran I thought I saw an opportunity to use my incriminating letter to Hain in evidence against him. In order to do so, however, it was necessary to devise a way to get him to identify. It without knowing he was doing so. After photographing his letter, I therefore tore out the words in which he had described the goods he had for sale, and wrote on the back of the sheet what appeared to be memoranda regarding the purchase of merchandise of the kind for which I shall soon make clear. When the day came for Hain to meet Moran I told Gopher I wanted him to go with me to Camden to tell me if a man whom I mentioned I expected to arrest was one of the men concerned in a robbery that Gopher knew about. The old man, knowing he would get \$2 for his trouble, readily consented to go. What I wanted was to get Gopher out of Philadelphia while Hain and Moran were negotiating, as I knew Moran, in order to protect himself, would hire Bill to pass out the counterfeit and receive Hain's good money. With one excuse and another I kept the old man in Camden until afternoon, by which time I calculated that Moran would have tired of waiting for him and finished the deal himself.

Hain afterward told me that Moran ran all over town, pretending he was trying to find the man who had the counterfeit, and eventually passed it over himself.

The next thing was to get Gopher into jail as quickly as possible in order not to give Moran an opportunity to flee before we could get him too. So I told him I wanted him to go with me to help me identify a man for whom I pretended to be looking. We walked over to the entrance of the building in which the United States Marshal's office was located, and then I told him I thought we had better go inside, as I did not wish to be seen. Hain, however, realized I had him in the Marshal's office. I gave a signal to Tom Marple, the chief deputy, and he put the old man under arrest.

Marple and I then started for Moran's saloon. As we drew near the place Moran came out and walked down the street in our direction. Moran knew Marple well, he had no idea who he was, and he extended a hand to each in salutation. Each of us grasped a hand and shook it. Each of us held the hand we grasped. As the duration of the greeting seemed to



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Moran to be a little prolonged, he looked first at Hain, then at me, in a started sort of way. He tried to pull his hands away. They were fast.

"Come with me," said Marple. "You are under arrest."

Gopher's case was set first for trial and he pleaded guilty. Judge Cadwallader, who was on the bench, received the plea and rendered the sentence with Saturday—it was then Tuesday, if I remember correctly. Moran's case came next, and he put up a stubborn fight. In his day he had been powerful in local politics, and a number of prominent men testified to his good character. It was then that the attorney for the government made use of the letter that Moran had written to Hain in which he had told about the different kinds of counterfeit he had to sell.

Hain was called to the stand and testified to what took place at the meeting when Moran paid him the counterfeit.

"The first thing I did," said Hain, "was to uphold him for writing me so ungratefully. 'What do you mean?' said I, 'by sending such a letter through the mail?'"

"Moran asked if it could be possible that he had been so careless. I replied in the affirmative and withdrew from my pocket his letter. 'There's what you wrote,' said I, 'only I have torn out the words in which you described the counterfeit. Don't ever do that again.'"

"I didn't realize," said Moran, "that I had been so careless. Give me the letter," and he reached out his hand to take it.

"No," said I, as I turned the sheet over. I have written down some things on the back of the

paper that I must buy for my family and I want to keep it!"

"All right," said Moran, "but tear it up as soon as you get through with it."

This testimony, of course, if it were true, constituted a complete identification of the letter. But a fortunate circumstance had given me additional proof. Before Moran's arrest I had sent him a letter, in which I asked him to write and let me know where and when I could see him. I supposed he would send the reply to my office, and therefore I gave no address. I was surprised, therefore, one evening when he came to my house and asked to see me. I went to the door and he handed me a letter.

"Here is a letter that I wrote to you to-day," said he, "but when I came to direct it I found that you had given no address, and as I did not know the street number of your house I brought it over. There is nothing in it except the statement that I can't see you if you want me to to the back room of my saloon next Sunday morning."

I thanked him, and put the letter in my pocket without reading it. I knew it would come in handy in backing up his letter to Hain, and wanted to get it out of his sight.

After Hain had finished his testimony I was called to the stand, where I told the story of the second letter. As the law stood at that time, attorneys could not make compulsory testimony, and I was obliged to give examples of handwriting for the purpose of showing their similarity, but the two letters were nevertheless handed to the jury.

Moran was convicted without hesitation, and sentenced to four years' imprisonment. The severity of the sentence made Gopher change his mind about

pleading guilty, and he asked permission to withdraw his plea. The term of court was about to close, and Judge Cadwallader said the plea must stand unless the government could get its witnesses back before the following Wednesday. Some of the witnesses were already as far away as Chicago, and the requirements of the court could therefore not be met.

Gopher Bill stood up in fear and trembling to receive his sentence.

"The sentence of this court," said Judge Cadwallader, in the squeaky voice that all who knew him will so well remember, "is that the defendant be imprisoned in the State Penitentiary for a period of eighteen months."

The unexpected leniency almost unnerfed Gopher. If he had gone to trial he probably would have got five years.

The old man, who was then sixty-five, served his time, came out, and, great bank burglar that he had been in his prime, was the cheap handy man of criminals to the end of his days. Moran also served his full sentence. I found out afterward that he intended to "put me out of business," as he expressed it, if I had kept the appointment to meet him in the back room of his saloon that Sunday morning. He told a number of his gang that such was his intention. It was never my purpose to meet him, but if I had I presume that somebody who was ostensibly a drunken loafer would have tried to give me a black eye. Moran would have kicked him out of the place—apparently acting indignantly and as my friend—after which Moran and all his friends would have gloated over my misfortune.

(THE NEXT STORY IN THIS SERIES WILL APPEAR NEXT SUNDAY.)