TRUE DETECTIVE STORIES
LOVE and the COUNTERFEITERS
By A. L. Drummond, Formerly Chief of the U. S. Secret Service

Gaetano Russo.

Mrs. Rosa Russo.

A. L. Drummond.

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WHEN we speak of jealousy and crimes caused by jealousy we invariably think also of love and women. This is so because the heart's most tender emotion, in certain circumstances, gives rise to this particular form of insanity, and women are more likely than men to succumb to it. But I once knew a man whose jealousy exceeded that of any woman whom I ever encountered, whose fury caused him to commit the most terrible crimes, and yet there was no element of love in it. In fact, his victims were men.

I was in charge of the New York district of the United States Secret Service when this man came into my office. It was in 1885, if I remember correctly. I happened to glance through an open door into the reception room when he came in and saw him. He asked for me. His appearance was so forbidding that my chief clerk, not knowing who he was or what he wanted, was temporizing with him when I stepped to the door and told him to come in.

"You doona know me?" he said, in a high pitched tone, heavily laden with foreign accent.

"Yes," I said, "I know you."

"You know me?"—this with an air of incredulity and amazement. "Then what ees my name?"

"Your name," I replied, "is Gaetano Russo. You are a murderer, you burned a tenement house in New Orleans in which a number of persons lost their lives, and you are a counterfeiter."

I never saw a tiger spring at his prey. I don't need to. I saw Russo that moment. Advancing toward me and bending over me, his ugly face distorted with rage, he fairly shouted:—

"I betta a-fifta dolla you no can prove I eva maka da countafet." Then, with a shrug of the shoulders and a wave of uplifted palms:—"I mighta kill one-a man, but I no maka da countafet mon."

"Here's your picture, Russo," said I, handing him his own photograph, "taken when you were tried for and convicted of counterfeiting."

"That no looka like me," he grunted.

"You are a better looking man now," I said, laughing, "but that's you all right."

Turning sharply the course of the conversation he said:—

"I come-a do business with you."

"All right," I said, "sit down. What do you want?"

"Im-a not tired. I can stand. You chief here?"

I told him I was.

"You know one-a countafet man named Colendrino?"

I replied that I had heard of such a man.

"He maka da plenta countafet mon. He gota one house, away up town. He gotta fiva sixa men—come eva morning 'bout sixa seven o'clock. They maka da countafet mon all day—da ten cent, da twenty-five cent and da half dol; maka da plenta, thousana dol. Colendrino, he sell, everybody they pass, all ova New York.

"You wanta catch? I tella you how. You go his house, you knocka da door—nobody letta you in. Missa Colendrino, his-a wife, look outa window uppa stair. She no opa door. You no getta in. But you getta somes pict (picture) under your arm—getta religious pict, hold so—she look. She coma down letta you in.

"You getta whole lot officer. Keep 'em a-back. She no see. When she opa door, you shova da foot, she no canna shut. Alla officer rush in a house."

"Don't you suppose they've got a lot of weapons in there?" I asked.

"Gotta couple pistol on shelf," he replied. "One-a, two-a man, Italian-a fight. Five-a, six-a officer, Italian-a run."

"Well," said I, "I'd like to capture Colendrino if he is doing any counterfeiting. But are you sure he is?"

He said he was sure. He had seen the whole band at work.

"I wanta catcha da bad man maka da contafet mon," he added.

He then suggested that I should meet him at five o'clock in the afternoon of the same day at 108th street and Second avenue, at the elevated railroad station, down stairs. He said he would walk ahead of me, and as soon as he reached a point directly in front of Colendrino's house, which sat far back from the street, he would drop his handkerchief.

"You come alone—I come alone," he said in conclusion.

I had sent so many Italians to jail that I did not know whether this was a trap to catch me, but I decided to go into it.

"I'll meet you there this afternoon," said I. "When you see me get off the train you start to walk. Keep ahead of me all the time. Never walk toward me. And keep your hands out of your pockets."

All right. He would do as I said. Anything to "catcha da bad man maka da countafet mon."

As Russo left the building one of my men "spotted" him—that is, waited for him in the corridor outside in order that he might have a good opportunity to see him. During my conversation with Russo I had made an excuse to go into another room for a moment in order to tell this man to lay for my visitor. I wanted one of the detectives to be able to recognize him on sight.

I told this other detective to be at 106th street and Second avenue at five o'clock.

"I'll walk on the same side of the street behind Russo," I said. "You walk on the opposite side a few feet ahead of him. If he looks for a 'shadow' he will look behind him and will not see you. And the moment you see him drop his handkerchief turn to the left at the first corner."

The three of us met at the appointed place and time without any two of us recognizing another. The moment Russo saw me he stopped whittling a piece of wood and swung off down the street. And what a street it was at that time! A lot of tumbledown buildings strung along the East River docks. The locality was one of the toughest in New York.

Russo walked to 108th street and the Eastern Boulevard, when suddenly he dropped his handkerchief. I noted where it fell, and as I passed the spot a moment later saw in the back of the lot a building, in front of which several men were sitting. I did not stop, and, having turned to the left at the next corner, soon met the other detective—or, rather, he overtook me two blocks up the street. He said Russo had done as he agreed to do—had come alone. Nobody had lurked around as if he knew our mission.

I at once put two men at work watching the house. They took up their watch on a Saturday, and for ten days nothing happened. Every morning five or six men entered the house. Every night they left. But none of them ever brought any metal, any plaster of paris or any of the other materials generally used in counterfeiting.

I didn't know what to do. Russo's reputation was so bad that I could not depend upon his word. The men, for all I knew, might be engaged in making some of the little toys that Italians so often make in their homes. At that time there was no law authorizing Secret Service men or police to search suspected premises for counterfeit money, though I had such a law enacted in 1891, and if I had forced my way into the house at the head of a number of men the inmates would have been perfectly justified in shooting me. I talked the matter over with Chief Brooks, who chanced to come up from Washington, and he forbade me to enter the house without proof of the criminal character of the work going on inside.

Friday night two weeks after the watch began my men reported to me that on the morning of that day a moving van had driven up to the house and taken away all of its contents. The van had been driven to a point in Fifty-fifth street near Eleventh avenue, where the furniture was carried into a five or six story brick tenement building. My men also reported that on the same day they had tracked Colendrino to an Italian steamship office.

The next day, Saturday, Russo came to my office. He was the angriest man I ever saw.

"Why you no catcha da bad man?" he roared. "I tella you how—I tella you where. You no catcha. Colendrino he go by Italy Tuesday. Missa Russo she go by Colendrino's house this week and she see them make a plenta countafet. She see bushel on da floor. You no catcha—I catcha."

What Russo said about his wife visiting Colendrino's house I knew to be true, as my men had reported it to me. However, there was nothing to do but to keep up the watch on the house in the hope that something would be seen that would justify us in breaking in.

Another week passed. Colendrino, who had not been seen since the move from 108th street, had not once passed in or out. Nor had his wife, nor any of the children. A day or two later, however, a physician went into the house, stayed a little while and came out. The next day he came again. And, the day following a man with his head heavily bandaged looked out of the fifth story window of the apartments in which Colendrino lived.

The man was Colendrino himself!

Still nothing had been observed that we could use as a pretext for breaking into the place. And a few days later another moving van appeared in front of the door. The goods were loaded into it and moved to avenue C and Sixth street. Colendrino, still bandaged, followed with his wife on a street car. And after living in the new place a few days the Colendrino household effects were bundled on to a truck and moved to Hoboken. The family also disappeared and we had reached what seemed to be the end of the case.

I had almost dismissed the matter from my mind when, a week or two later, there came to my office an Italian informer who had frequently given me valuable information concerning the crimes of some of his countrymen.

"You know about Colendrino?" he asked. "Colendrino get ready go Italy. Go steamship office on a Saturday, getta da ticket. Same afternoon Missa Russo come Colendrino's house, say to Missa Colendrino, 'You come our house to-morrow, bring husband. You going Italy—we give nice dinner before go. We have plenta da wine, plenta eat, good time. You come.'

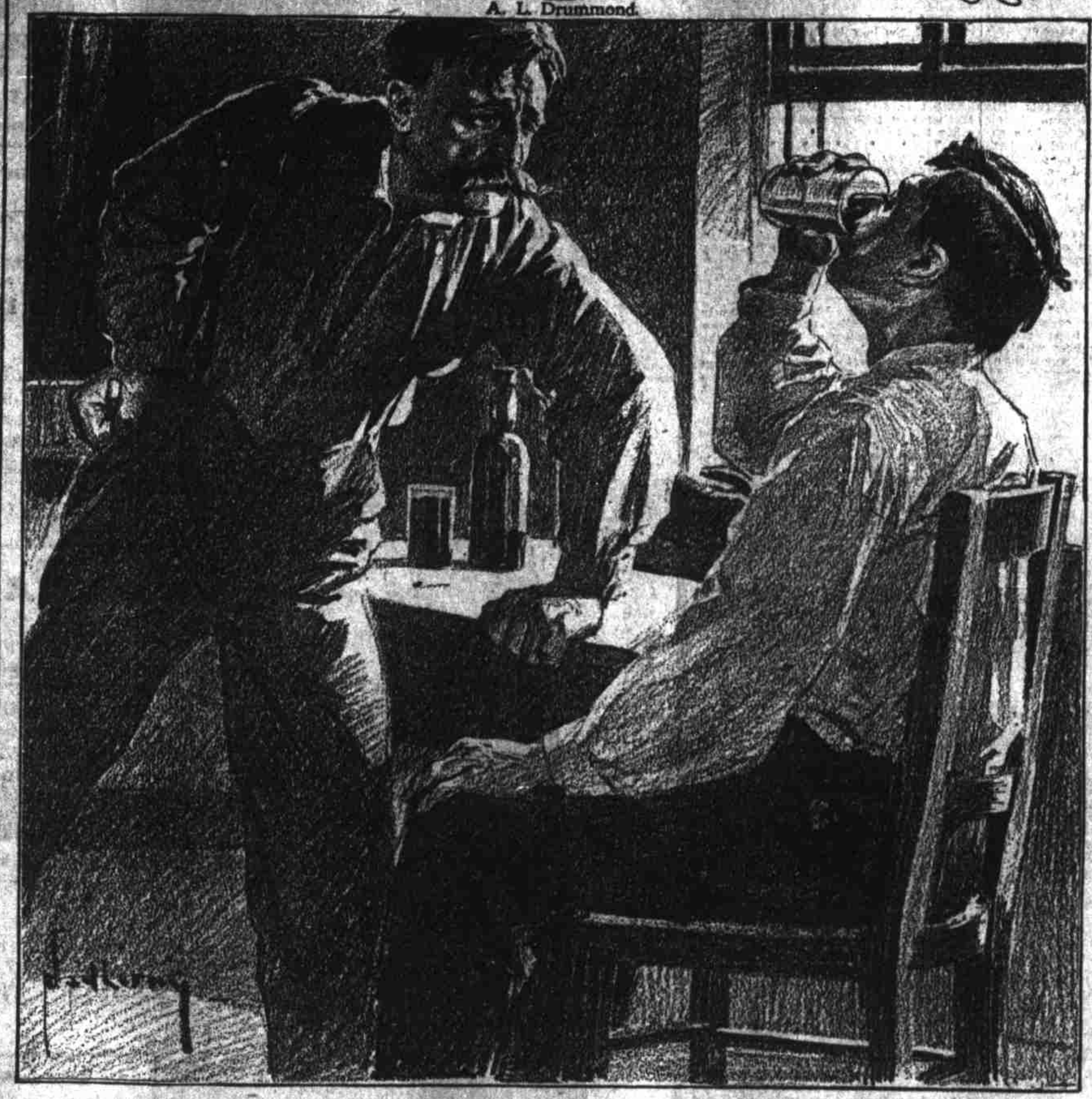
"Next day Colendrino and wife go Russo's house. Missa Russo say to Missa Colendrino, 'I go store getta da fine ice cream. You go with me.' Missa Colendrino go.

"While they away Russo say to Colendrino, 'Oh, it is so hot to-day. I take off my coat. You taka da coat off, too, Colendrino, maka da self comfort. Taka da vest off, too—I do. Be comfort.' And Colendrino take off da coat and da vest.

"What for Russo want Colendrino take off da coat and da vest? He want to see if Colendrino have da stillet.

"Then Russo pour outa da big glass wine and say, 'Here, Colendrino, I drink to you health.' Colendrino taka da glass, raise to his face, tip back his head and start to drink.

"But Russo not drink just yet. Russo pull something from pocket. Russo, you know, when in Italy, shoemaker. Russo pull from da pocket little knife, blade only inch long, that he use to trim off sole of shoe. And while Colendrino's head tipped back Russo draw knife from top of face to bottom."


"Russo pull something from pocket."

My informer went on, in his broken English, to tell how Colendrino, believing he had been mortally wounded, rushed for home, telling everybody he met that Gaetano Russo had slashed him. A policeman heard his story, intercepted him and took him to a hospital. A long search for Russo finally resulted in bringing him to the bedside of his victim. But in the meantime Colendrino, having changed his mind about the imminence of his own death, only stared blankly at him. He said he had never seen Russo before in his life.

"What for Russo cutta Colendrino with big knife?" my informer repeated after me. "Same reason he killa da barber in Chicago. He showa da barber how to maka da countafet mon. Da barber soon maka da better countafet than Russo. Russo not like that. He getta da jealousy. He go into barber shop one day, say to barber, 'Oh, what fine pict on bottle way up shelf! Take it down so I see it.' And when da barber getta on da chair to reach bottle Russo stick da stillet into him. He die.

"Same way Colendrino. Russo shows him how to maka da countafet. Colendrino maka him better than Russo. Maka da plenty—maka da fine. Get reech. Russo no like it. Russo say, 'I not killa him. I maka da big scar on face, so when he go back Palermo everybody know he traitor.'"

I knew this to be true. Russo had killed a barber in Chicago and had been convicted of murder in the first degree. But he got a new trial, and when he came into court again the principal witness against him was not there. He had been spirited away, bribed away or murdered. So Russo was acquitted. Later he went to New Orleans and started a little shoe store beside a tenement house. To get the insurance on the store he burned the tenement house and several persons lost their lives. For this he was sentenced to imprisonment in the penitentiary at Baton Rouge. He had been there only a few years when he organized a plot among the convicts to murder some of the guards and escape.

When he had perfected all his plans and the time had been set Russo betrayed the plot to the warden. All the guards were put on post, armed to the teeth, waiting for the outbreak. It came just at the time Russo said it would. A murderous fire was poured into the convicts and two were killed. A little later Russo was pardoned, the State authorities not knowing that he had put up the whole job in order to betray it to the prison officials for the purpose of getting his own liberty as a possible reward.

But I have yet to tell of the most spectacular crime that Russo ever committed. An Italian merchant, whose place of business used to be down in the lower end of Manhattan, went to him one day and told him he wanted a certain man killed. For the job he was willing to pay $500.

Russo said he would do it. Unfortunately for the merchant, however, as it afterward proved, the man who was marked for slaughter was a friend of Russo. Russo went to him and told him he had been offered $500 to kill him, at the same time outlining a plan by which they could divide the merchant's money between themselves without any murder being done.

Russo's plan was this:—The man upon whose head a price had been set was to go to a butcher shop and get a large beef liver. He was then to go home, undress, get into bed, have his wife bandage up his head and smear both the bandages and the bed clothes with the liver. She was then to circulate the story around the neighborhood that her husband had been fatally stabbed by Gaetano Russo. If neighbors came to the house, as they assuredly would, they were to be permitted only to peep through a door held slightly ajar—enough only to see the bandages and bed clothes—and told that the patient was so low the physician had forbidden any one to enter the room.

The "victim" agreed and the scheme was carried out just as it had been conceived in the crafty brain of Russo. But at this time an unexpected complication arose. The merchant refused to pay the $500 when Russo called for it. The "murder" did not look good to him. It was true he had heard of the assault upon his enemy and of his subsequent death, but he had not been able to find any one who had attended the funeral, much less seen the body. He was not a man to break his word, but he did not want to pay for work that he doubted had been done.

Russo left the merchant's store with an idea lurking in his mind that he was convinced would bring forth the merchant's money. The next day he and five confederates appeared in the business place of the man who would not pay the $500. In less time than it takes to write it the six had ranged themselves in a semi-circle in front of their victim and each had placed the point of a stiletto on the merchant's throat. And in the fewest possible number of words the man was given to understand that he must instantly produce the $500 due for the murder committed at his behest by Russo, or else the stilettos would simultaneously enter his neck.

The merchant said he had only $200 in his store. He was told they would take this on account. His wife went to the cash drawer, got the money and handed it over. And the highwaymen left the place without either the man or his wife having made an outcry. Not only that, when the police heard of the affair and went to the merchant's store, both he and his wife denied that anything of the kind had occurred. They knew very well that to talk meant death—Russo and his band would have killed them.

Yet it is a peculiarity of Italians to believe in settling their own trouble among themselves, and if, in attempting to do so, one gets the worst of it, not to cause any arrests. The Italians hold court at their card parties.

This is what I mean:—An Italian learns that a countryman has committed some offence against him—spoken disparingly of his wife or done something else. He tells half a dozen of his friends and the offender is invited to a card party to be held, a night or so later, at the home of one of their number.

The man attends the party. The play begins without anything to make him suspicious. He is treated exactly as are all the others. Probably the whole partly drinks freely. Before the game breaks up, however, the blow has fallen. Perhaps the man is in the hospital, perhaps in the morgue—it all depends on what he has done and what the others believe his punishment should be. Maybe he is let off with a beating and black eyes, and, again, it may be that a gash has been put across his face so that when he returns to Italy, as they all hope to do, he will go branded as one whom no one can trust.

If the sentence of the "court" be anything less than murder or assault to commit murder, the police, when they reach the scene of the disturbance, usually find no witnesses. Quite often there are found in the room only an aged woman and a young man. The woman says she has neither heard of nor seen any trouble, and the young man says he has just reached the house on an errand. It is the Italian way of getting along without the police.

That is the way Colendrino did. Over in Palermo, if he is still living, he is wearing the scar every beholder knows to be a brand that some one has rightfully or wrongfully put on him, but no one knows Russo put it there. Russo's friends in Italy would kill Colendrino if he were to tell.

Yet the secretiveness of his countrymen was not enough to keep Russo long out of prison. A few years after I had my experience with him—in 1890, if I remember correctly—he and his wife were sent up for twelve years for counterfeiting. I believe he died in prison.

He was the strangest man I ever knew. Crafty, cunning and vicious, he was yet a coward at heart. His egotism could not tolerate the idea that pupils of his should excel him in making counterfeit money, so he slew one and maimed the other—but in each case he made the attack like the craven he was.

(The next Story in this series will appear next Sunday.)

A POST CARD PANIC.

THE post card business is seriously depressed at present, while some of the great foreign markets are bordering on panic. Overproduction and wild speculation in the commodity are the causes. The public has watched the gradual encroachment of the souvenir post card with surprise perhaps, but without realising the enormous proportions of the industry. In order to supply the little stands in every store, at every cross roads the country over, an immense industry has been developed in practically all civilised lands. Incidentally the United States imported from Germany in a single year more than $8,000,000 worth of the bits of cardboard.

The post card panic is most acute at present in Germany. A year ago the great post card firms there, anticipating a great boom in the business, especially in England and America, used every facility to increase their stock in those countries, but speculation and overproduction have brought the situation to a crisis. The dealers could not afford to hold these supplies and were forced to get rid of them at any price. The card industry lost heavily, as much as $25,000 on a single customer.