

# CONFESSION OF "COMITO," TOOL OF THE BLACK HAND

By  
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A SECRET Service operative was shadowing a man he suspected of being one of the Black Hand counterfeiters.

For days he had trailed this man, while other operatives had watched other members of the society. The net was drawing closer about Lupo and Morello. We knew several of their lieutenants, but we were greedy for more evidence, more facts. My men were under orders to find out where the counterfeiting plant was. For reasons I have previously explained I shall not divulge the name of the operative in question.

He followed his man into New York's Grand Central Station. There the suspicious counterfeiter bought a cigar and went into smoking room and remained for some time. After that he had his shoes polished. Then he walked out of the building to Sixth avenue, strolled through to Forty-fourth street, where he turned west and returned to the railroad terminal.

Every step of the way the Secret Service operative was behind him. When the counterfeiter reached the ticket office the operative was only a few feet behind him. He hurried to get in line behind the man he was following. In his hurry he jostled against a woman carrying a heavy suit case. Hastily he apologized, but the delay was just enough to keep him a few paces from the counterfeiter when he purchased a ticket.

The operative could not hear the name of the place to which the ticket was purchased, but he saw him give a two-dollar bill to the agent and receive fifty cents in change.

He was afraid to ask the agent about the ticket. There was little possibility that the agent could be connected with the Black Hand society, but there might be half a dozen counterfeiters watching him, and if he showed any particular interest in the movements of the Black Hand they would immediately tip off their comrade and the operative would become the one who was shadowed.

For the same reason he thought it inadvisable to follow the man into the train. But one thing was established. If the man was one of the counterfeiters and was going to the place where the bogus money was being made, the plant was at a place which could be reached from New York for \$1.50 railroad fare. At first I thought it was Poughkeepsie. Then I began to put two and two together and, remembering that Lupo, when he fled from New York went to Ardonia, a little town back of Highland, N. Y., I became convinced that the counterfeiting plant must be somewhere along the west bank of the Hudson River not far from Highland.

The country a short distance back of the hills which line the river is very wild and very lonesome and would be an ideal section for the plant of the counterfeiters. Investigation of that whole district was immediately started, but an unforeseen coup made possible by one of my best men hastened the final round-up of the counterfeiters.

Because it is nothing like his real name, we will call this operative Logan.

Logan is known in the files of the Secret Service as a fearless operative. Should the Black Hand members ever so much suspect that he was in the employ of the government he will be found in some secluded spot, his body covered with knife wounds, the mark of the Black Hand pinned to his clothing as a warning to those who would whisper the secrets of the Black Hand. The murderers might be some day apprehended, but the reason for the crime would never be known. Those of the public who gave to the incident any attention at all would set it down to a squabble between thieves and let it go at that. None would ever know that a man had died in the act of performing his duty to the state and to society—died a hero unused.

After months of patient toil and after risking his life a score of times, Logan worked his way into the inner councils of the Black Hand society.

On one occasion a member of the society pointed out to Logan a man whom the counterfeiters called "Comito the Sheep."

"There goes the man," said the counterfeiter, "who operates the presses. He it is who actually makes the bogus money and it is time that you should know him."

Later met Comito and became his friend. At the very earliest opportunity he pointed him out to me and I knew that at last the goal for which I had been striving was close at hand.



ANTONIO  
COMITO



CATHERINE  
THE SWEETHEART  
OF COMITO



Now, I learned that Comito was living in a little flat in New York city with a woman named Caterina. He being the man that printed the notes I, of course, expected to find bundles of them in his rooms, together with letters and other evidence connecting him with Lupo, Morello and others. I went to his flat to make the arrest in person. My men searched the place from end to end. Every nook and cranny was pried into. Caterina was searched and all her belongings were gone over carefully. Not a single bogus note was found, nor were any blackmail letters discovered. I had heard that Comito was merely the dupe of the Black Handers, and that he was not at heart a criminal nor had he profited at all by the counterfeiting scheme. The lack of evidence in his apartment seemed to corroborate this.

"The Sheep" was well named. Instead of placing him under arrest I sat down and had a long talk with him. Not only was I convinced that Comito had been a dummy, but I soon learned that if I could get him to talk I would have a witness who could fasten guilt upon almost every man of the hand I was running to earth. This strange character was influenced to a remarkable extent by kindness.

There were tears in his eyes when I told him that neither he nor Caterina would be arrested, but in the plainest terms I stated that at the first attempt to mingle again with the Black Handers he would find himself entangled with the law.

Though they were allowed to go free the Secret Service did not for a moment relax vigilance. The girl was spirited away and put under the protection of the government and Comito himself was under my own supervision. For days he was in the Custom House in New York, never leaving the building except disguised and with me.

For days I worked over him, always treating him with the greatest kindness and striving to overcome the fear which at times got the better of him. As you shall see when I come to Comito's confession, which I shall make public for the first time since it was written for me in long hand by "The Sheep" himself, he had reason to fear the vengeance of the society for which he had worked. He knew what had happened to many a man who had whispered of the affairs of the Black Hand.

Each night I went with Comito to some Italian restaurant and dined on spaghetti with tomato sauce and onion soup until I felt inside like a Sicilian and added inches to my girth. At first Comito glanced fearfully about him and only played with his food. He knew the men with whom he had to deal and

he knew their methods, but gradually he came to look upon me as the representative of a power greater than that of the Black Hand, a power for law and order which would protect him even against the secret vengeance of the men from Corleone.

During these excursions with Comito I established the identity of many men among the counterfeiters whom I had not known before. Comito also gave me much information about the workings of the society, its methods and its activities. Closer and closer we drew the net about the leaders, as Comito furnished us with more and more information. The activities of my men showed the Black Handers that the Secret Service was learning some of their secrets. The members of the society knew that Comito had fallen into my clutches and they realized that it must be he who was telling me of their affairs. Lupo and Morello offered \$2,500 for information as to where Comito was, but they never found out.

Knowing that Logan, the operative who pointed out Comito to me, was a friend of "The Sheep," Lupo and Morello thought it possible that the two might communicate. They did not suspect Logan of being a spy. Had they done so his life would have paid for it. They would have taken no chances. However, they believed that Comito might write to Logan.

One of Morello's aids procured from the Post Office a regular printed card used to notify the Postmaster of change of address. This was filled out and mailed to the Postmaster with Logan's name signed to it, asking that his mail be forwarded to No. 23 New Bowery.

Now as Logan had actually worked his way into the inner councils of the Black Hand, other operatives who did not know that he was in the employ of the government were continually trailing him. As soon as the change of address card was received at the Post Office, one of these men notified me. I asked Logan if he had filled out the card or if he had changed his place of living.

"No," he said, "I have done nothing of the kind."

He was very much surprised to hear that the card had been mailed and more astounded to learn that I knew all about it. He did not know that other Secret Service operatives suspected him of being a counterfeiter and were watching his every move.

I obtained the card and it was at once evident that the signature was not Logan's. It asked to have his mail forwarded to an address where Don Gasparo kept a drug store in which was a branch post office used frequently by the Black Hand members. Much of their mail was



sent there. It did not take long for operatives to dig up Gasparo's past. He had lived for a long time in the Bronx near the tenement houses built by Morello and Lupo. From time to time he had been associated with Morello in ventures which did not make for the peace of the community. There were many reasons why he should desire to help Morello.

So we laid a counter plot to the change of address scheme. From all parts of the country I caused to be mailed letters in various-colored envelopes addressed to Logan in the Custom House, New York city. Of course these letters were all forwarded to the branch post office in Don Gasparo's drug store, at No. 23 New Bowery, and placed in the general delivery box marked L.

The envelopes were made large and colored so that Secret Service men could at a considerable distance, see who took them from the general delivery box. For days my men watched the place. They saw the envelopes placed in the box. They saw men they knew to be Black Handers go into the drug store and call for mail, but none took the letters written to Logan.

A strange face passing by the window; a hint dropped at some secret meeting; an unknown person seen frequently in the neighborhood; any of these would have been enough to frighten the men who otherwise would have called for and taken away Logan's mail. Some Black Handers may have been on the very point of asking for the letters. A carefree boy passing the store may have whistled shrilly. That would be enough to prevent him fulfilling his mission. Moreover it is doubtful if any man would have gone for the letters without a look-out being posted near the store. Should this look-out become the least suspicious of any person in the neighborhood, or see any one of whom he was not absolutely certain, he would manage to convey to the man inside the store a warning not to act.

But if my little plot failed so did that

of the Black Handers. They never learned where Comito was.

All this time I had been gathering information from Comito, and at last in Washington, after I promised to protect him from the vengeance of the Black Hand, he wrote his confession, which will show you what the counterfeiters were doing all the time that my men were drawing the net about them. It has been said that Comito's confession was written from him through the so-called "third degree." This is not so. It was won through kindness. With some men this would not have been possible, but with "The Sheep" it was the only way.

Parts of the confession I will quote verbatim, but it will be necessary from time to time to digress and connect the doings of the counterfeiters with the actions of my men. It was not until I had Comito's confession complete that I arrested the members of the Lupo-Morello gang.

Comito was a native of Canauero, Calabria, a province of Southern Italy. He went to New York in the latter part of June, 1907. He had been a teacher in private and government schools and was a printer by trade. Seven years of his life were spent in South America, where he learned to speak Spanish very fluently. In Rio Janeiro he taught school and assisted the Italian Consul. In introducing his confession Comito wrote in his own quaint way:

"You will pardon me if in reading the story of my connection with the counterfeiters there are errors of language and periods not well expressed."

"During the latter part of 1908 and a good part of 1909 I had occasion to know many malefactors who from the beginning horrified me and after I had studied their brutal character I feared. I refrained from denouncing them to the police because I was constantly in danger of losing my life had I done so."

"This is the explanation, in a few words, of Comito's connection with the Black Hand Society. He goes on to say:

"My brother met me at the Battery and completing my embraces with him I remained a little confused. Through the dizzying crowds and traffic he took me to his home. After dinner my uncle, who is a very intelligent man and cautious, and who served the Italian government for twelve years as a non-commissioned officer in the line infantry, talked to me privately.

"Do not acquire bad friendships," he said. "Be careful of traps which evil men may lay for you. There exists in New York a band of malefactors who go by the name Black Hand. Every day this band commits crimes, assassinating persons, setting fire to houses, breaking in doors, exploding bombs and kidnapping children."

"My uncle's talk I took to heart, for I was desirous only of working and did not think of badness. I was a printer and though I did not know English very well I thought to get work on an Italian newspaper. At last I obtained a position with M. Dasso and was able to send considerable money to Italy. I became a member of the Order of the Sons of Italy and the Foresters of America and in the first named society I became supreme deputy. Business troubles came and I was frequently out of work."

"At times I had little money, but I was in love with a young Italian girl, Caterina, who lived with me and who was my best friend throughout all the trials which came. We divided our money equally when times were hard and sometimes Caterina made more than I did."

"On the evening of November 5, 1908, I was at a meeting of the Sons of Italy. As was the custom, toward the end of the evening I chatted with the various members of the order. One, Don Pasquale by name, came to me, clasped my hand, and without further ceremony said, 'Professor will you take a walk with me? I have something to talk of to-night that will interest you.'

"When we were entirely alone, Pasquale said, 'I know that you seek work and that you are a good printer. I know of a position in Philadelphia and I can recommend you for it to my friend there. But it will be necessary for you to go to Philadelphia to work.'

"It makes no difference to me, so that I work," I told him.

"The next morning I was awakened by a knocking on my door. I opened it and Don Pasquale and another man entered."

"This," said Pasquale, "is Don Antonio Cecala, proprietor of a printing shop in Philadelphia."

Cecala, you will remember was arrested with Boscarini at one time and served a term in prison for circulating counterfeit money.

To continue Comito's confession:—"Are you a printer?" asked Cecala.

"Yes," I replied.

"Well," said Cecala, "I am the pro-

prietor of a printing shop in Philadelphia, and I need a trustworthy man who will look after my interests while I am away on my other work, inspecting sewing machines. If we reach an agreement I hope that you will bring your wife to Philadelphia with you, for then I shall be more certain of your honesty."

"But I shall not act as boss, shall I? You must have other experienced men there," I said.

"They do not know their business," Cecala told me. "They cannot properly execute the work I wish you to do."

"Cecala then showed me some money-order blanks, commercial papers and handbills, and I told him that such work was my specialty."

"It was agreed that Caterina should go with me to Philadelphia, and Cecala promised us that we should soon be so wealthy we would not have to work. It was not fixed in my mind just where Philadelphia was, for I had not been in America long and had remained all the time in New York. But Cecala told me we would be well taken care of during the trip, and that if I did not care to keep the position I would receive my fare back to New York. When Cecala promised to pay the rent we owed on our rooms and to discharge our other debts Caterina or I had contracted, I was swept by a great wave of gratitude. Cecala even told me that we should live in the house where he carried on his business, and that there would be no rent pay, as he owned it."

"When Caterina returned from that evening she cried with happiness over the news and seemed more joyful over my own fortune than her own. At first she did not want to go with me, however, for she said the trip would be expensive, and she wanted to remain at her work so that all my earnings would benefit me. It was not until I told her that the expenses for both of us were to be paid that she consented to go."

"With Cecala I went to a photographer's and bought cameras, plates and a tripod, and then to the printing shop in which I had worked and struck a bargain for a press which Cecala said he needed. It was on leaving there that I met 'Don Turi' Cina, whom Cecala introduced as his godfather. Cina took my hand in his great paw and shook it so that the bones cracked, and I could have groaned with the pain of it. He was a terrible man. That I knew at the first sight of him."

"Do not watch his ordinary clothes," said Cecala to me. "He is a man of gentle manners."

"Late in the afternoon Cecala, Cina, Don Pasquale and a man named Sylvestre rushed into our rooms and began putting labels on the furniture, which we had packed for shipping. All the time Cecala kept me busy with some papers and Caterina was so occupied with wrapping up some of the smaller things that neither of us noticed what was printed on the labels."

"Just as they were carrying the furniture from the house my eye caught one of the tags. On it was printed:—

"A Cina, Highland."

"Suspicious, I turned upon Cecala. 'Do we not go to Philadelphia?' I cried.

"A—ha—ha," laughed Cecala, and his eyes shot black, wicked fire. 'We go to Philadelphia, but the house is really outside the city. This is the place where the boat stops and from there we walk twenty minutes. But have no fear, you will be put to no inconvenience, for we shall hire a carriage. Do not worry about the labels. It is just as though we were sending the furniture to the Bronx or Harlem. Would it not be all New York?'

"But do we not go by rail?' I inquired.

"That would cost too much," said Cecala. 'Besides we could not load the furniture on the train as we can on the boat. It will be a beautiful trip.'

"We left New York that evening. When we were not more than two hours from the pier Cecala came to me and said, 'Mr. Comito, we are about to make a very poor showing.'

"Why is that?' I asked.

"Because I find I have not money enough to pay all the fares to Philadelphia. Our friends, who helped us pack the furniture are going to assist us in setting up the presses, so I should certainly pay their fare.'

"I have not one penny," I told him.

"When he asked Caterina if she could lend him some money she took five dollars from her stocking and gave it to him. This was the only money we had between us."

In this way Cecala and his friends made it impossible for Comito and Caterina to escape them if they should become suspicious. Once more, according to Comito's confession:—

"Late at night Cecala awoke me and said that the boat was stopping at Highland, where we should get off. It was cold and there was snow on the ground, which made Caterina very cross and we were not at all happy."

"I am sorry you are both tired after the trip," said Cecala. 'Philadelphia is not far from here, but we will stop at the house of my other godfather for a few days until you are rested.'

"We waited for half an hour on the pier and Caterina grew crosser each minute. I myself had many misgivings, yet I felt very grateful to these men and the thought of having good work and saving a little money outweighed all else."

"There was a clattering of horse hoofs and a wagon rattled up to the pier at great speed. Cecala introduced the driver as Vincenzo Ciglio, his father-in-law, and we drove to his place, where there was a great feast ready with plenty of wine, which put Caterina in a good humor once more. My suspicions were lulled and it seemed that at last life was to flow along like a beautiful dream."

How "life flowed along" for Comito and Caterina you will see by the next article.

"Well," said Cecala, "I am the pro-