

The Case Book of a Private Detective

True Narratives of Interesting Cases by a Former Operative of the William J. Burns Detective Agency
By DAVID CORNELL

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A MADE TO ORDER BANK BURGLARY

How a Vault and a Reputation Were Shattered by Too Much Dynamite

The Weldon Community bank, of Weldon, N. Y., was robbed by safe-blowers last night. Nitroglycerin was used to open the bank vault, with disastrous results to one of the robbers, who was blown to pieces by the explosion. His confederates successfully looted the bank and obtained \$35,000 in cash.

This little item carried by the various New York papers was the genesis of my connection with the great Weldon Community bank robbery. A few hours after the papers carrying the news were on the street I was on my way to Weldon, ordered by the Burns agency to investigate the case as a representative of the National Bankers' Protective Association.

As the reader probably is not familiar with the Weldon community it is necessary to delay my story a trifle in order that the situation may be made more clear. This community is one of several of the sort that may be found in southern New York and northern Pennsylvania. It was founded about 1840 by an Englishman named Weldon, who was in his own way a seeker after a modern Utopia.

Weldon believed that our whole system of living in cities, crowded and uncomfortable, or in country districts, isolated and lonesome, was all wrong. He believed that the small community, fifty families, for instance, gathered around a common center, and yet not gathered so closely together as to make an actual town, was the ideal, as well as the practical way, for mankind to dwell.

Unable to put into practice in that country his novel idea, he came to America and, after considerable searching, fixed upon the rich farming valley in southern New York as the spot most favorable for the location of the Weldon community. There he brought together about thirty families, bringing most of them from his native land, England.

He established a co-operative store, a blacksmith shop, a school, a church, a mill, in fact, everything needed to supply the welfare of an agricultural community—including the Weldon Community bank. This bank, while it was owned and patronized mainly by the people of the community, was chartered and managed as any small country bank would be.

Weldon had conducted its affairs himself at first. At his death it had passed to his son so far as management was concerned, though the title remained in the community. Weldon's son had continued the banking business as successfully as his father had done before him, and the bank was as prosperous and sound as a small bank possibly could be. It had never become a power, but on the other hand, it had never been in trouble once during its whole existence.

Weldon's son had died a few years before the robbery occurred, and the management thereupon had passed into the hands of Gilles, the cashier. He had done fully as well by the bank as the Weldons had, and the community had trusted its money to the bank's care as implicitly as ever. The bank had proved time and again that it was panic-proof; but it wasn't burglar-proof. After over sixty-five years of successful operation it had been cleaned out by the conventional accident of safe-blowing. Altogether it was a remarkable situation.

I found the little place in the greatest str of its history when I alighted from the accommodation train that carried me from the nearest city up the spur to Weldon community. There wasn't much of a town at Weldon, only a few stores, offices, warehouses and houses strung along the road in the center of the farms of the valley.

The bank was a neat, old gray-stone building that occupied a position of honor in the middle of it. It was a compact, sturdy looking building, obviously built with a view to guarding as well as possible whatever might be kept inside. Around the building were gathered most of the people of the community. The rest of them were leaning around the undertaker's shop across the road, where the body of the slain safe-blower lay for the present. The county sheriff and the coroner were doing their respective duties in assertive fashion, and the people had to content themselves with standing and looking at the outsiders of the buildings containing the objects that had aroused their curiosity. They were the most shocked and horror-stricken group that I had seen for a long time. It was the first real crime of any importance that had ever been committed in the valley within the memory of the oldest inhabitant, and the community was so awed by the shock of it that there was scarcely a thought left in the whole crowd.

I went to the bank first and my card was met in just the sheriff's deputy. I was received by Mr. Gilles, the president of the bank, and the board of directors, who were assembled in the waiting room. They were glad to see me. This was something altogether

out of their line, and they were relieved to have some one arrive on whom they could unload the burden of their worry.

"I had feared for years that it was coming," said Gilles. "Every night for the last twenty years that I have looked up that old-fashioned vault I have said to myself: 'What would happen if a safe-blower knew what a weak door stands between this bank's money and a robber?' I have recommended time after time the installation of new vaults, but you gentlemen of the directorate have seen fit to believe that economy should continue to be our watchword. Far be it from me to pretend to criticize, but there might be a different tale to tell this morning if there had been a modern vault in this bank."

"Oh, well," said one of the directors. "I suppose these safe-blowers got into any kind of a safe, couldn't they, Mr. Cornell?"

"Some of them can," I replied. "It depends on their skill. Suppose we take a look at the safe?"

Gilles promptly led us into the rear room, where the vault was located. I never have seen a vault or safe that had been used more roughly than the one that now was before my eyes. In the language of the profession, it had been "all shot to pieces." The door had been cracked and torn and twisted and flung across the room. Pieces of bolts, bars and iron were lying all over. It was impossible to tell what kind of a door it had been that locked in the Weldon community's money, so shattered was it. An enormous amount of horse blankets had been used to muffle the sound of the explosion.

"A big charge," I said. "A desperately big charge. They must have wanted to make sure of blowing her open and didn't fear to make a noise. Please leave everything just as it is and let us step across and look at the man who got caught in the explosion."

We—Mr. Gilles, the directors and myself—went over to the undertaking shop where the dead bandit lay. I had hoped to recognize him as some listed yeggman, though my acquaintance with that class was limited; but I was disappointed. His face had been blown so thoroughly to pieces in the explosion that it was impossible for anyone not familiar with his smallest characteristics to make out who he might have been. He was dressed a little better than the average yeggman, for there was the remnant of a clean cuff on one of his wrists, but this was all that I could make out in a cursory examination.

"I'll be back later," I told the man in charge. Then I told Gilles that I would like to hear the whole story of the affair.

He led the way back to his office in the bank building and told the story in a careful, intelligent way. There was nothing remarkable in the story. He had been called down to the bank at 6:30 that morning by a workman who, while passing to his work, had seen that the front door of the bank building was unlocked. He had gone in at once, in company with the workman. He had found the door between the banking room and the vault room locked, as usual. He had opened the door and had found the dead burglar and the looted safe, much as we had seen the room. Eighty-five thousand dollars in large bank notes had been taken. Some hundreds of dollars' worth of smaller bills and about a thousand dollars' worth of silver had not been touched. Nobody had been found who had heard the explosion, and there was absolutely no trace of the robbers.

That was Gilles' story. It was told in precise, clerical fashion, greatly in contrast to the story of the sheriff, who, when he was called in, rambled about bloodhounds and posers and made a fool of himself trying to appear "wise" before a city detective.

"You locked up the vault last night, did you, Mr. Gilles?" I asked.

"Yes sir," he answered.

"And this money was all in there when you locked it up?"

"Yes, of course."

I thanked him and said: "Now will you kindly let me go over the vault again alone? I must study it carefully in order to make out an intelligent report."

He acquiesced readily and I went in the room and shut myself in with the shattered vault.

I had been impressed with my first glance by the apparently enormous charge of explosive that had been used in the robbery. So terrible had the wreckage been that it seemed impossible to me that any living man could have been in that room and survived after the "soup" had scattered the fragments of that door around. The room was so narrow that it must have been like standing before a mortar loaded with scrap iron. The horse blankets were torn to shreds. I said to myself: "A bungler's job," and went out and telegraphed for an expert on explosives, for the expert of the firm that made the safe, and for Durango and Mahaffey, two of our men who knew most of the big yeggs in the country by sight. I locked and sealed the vault room, so it could not be tampered with.

When Mahaffey came he took one look at the dead yegg, lifted his hands and examined the back of them and found some tattoo marks and said: "Sailor Benny, as I'm alive! How did he ever get so far from Omaha? And how did he ever get in too much soup? He was the prince of them all in knowing just how much it took to loosen a door. By glory! Cornell, there's something queer about this. Benny never overloaded in his life."

The dynamite expert and the safe man came in on the next train and the three of us entered the vault room of the bank together. The dynamite man took one look around and said: "Shut the door."

"The safe man obeyed and, to make sure, I hung my coat over the key-hole."

"My gad!" said the safe man, almost crying. "It isn't possible. No safe of ours could be blown up in that fashion. Say, nobody ever could blow one of our safes up in that fashion—not even one of these old ones."

"Yes," said the dynamite man, "I've done it myself."

"How?"

"On a test," said the other. "By loading the safe on the inside and then locking the door."

"We looked at one another."

"That is what was done here, isn't it?" I said.

"Absolutely," said the dynamite man.

I sent for Mahaffey and told him what had been said.

"Then the job never was of Sailor Benny's doing," said he instantly.

"Good gad, man! The load must have been put in by the man who locked the door. And then how did Benny come to be killed cracking the door?"

The dynamite man and the safe man prepared to withdraw.

"I guess the case is all up to you, Mr. Cornell," they said. "It looks like work for a 'tec'."

They went away and Mahaffey and I sat down to theorize behind the locked door.

"Cornell," said Mahaffey, "there is this about this job: Somebody had

"There's a bad case, Cornell," he said. "Yes, I said, 'because the man who put that soup in there to go off when Benny came must have had something to hide, and this was the way he took to hide it. Mahaffey,' I said, 'suddenly, you and Durango both know all about Benny's old haunts out in Omaha. Better run out there right away and see if you can find why Benny came east.'"

"Ye-es," said he, slowly. "That's about the way she will work out. Why did Benny come east? Who got him to come? That's the question that's to be answered. Durango stays in that piece; he used to work in Omaha and knows Benny's girl."

When we came out of the vault room I said to the president:

"Well, Mr. Gilles, we have done about all we can do here. What we've got to do now is to try to look for this dead robber's confederate, the man who got the money. We will do our best, but I assure you it will be a hard task to find him."

"I fear so, Mr. Cornell," said Gilles. "But you people are very capable, I understand."

"We never have fallen down on a case yet," I said as we left him.

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arrest for robbing the Weldon Community bank of \$85,000.

"Great Scott!" he said. "Do you know what you are talking about? Are you crazy?"

"I hope not," I said. "Let me tell you what I have discovered since I came to Weldon: I discovered that you have been an inveterate Wall street gambler for the last ten years. It wasn't hard to do that; the brokers keep a list of every out-of-town trader they do business with. You had been trading under the name of Traversa, but your broker knew you were he. He had looked you up. You were fairly lucky for an outsider until last June. Then your losses began to pile up steadily. A month ago you owed \$85,000, and had to make it good or be exposed. You did make it good. You did make it good—out of that vault back there."

"You hoped to cover that loan you made yourself so that nobody ever would be the wiser for it. You hoped to put it back; they all do. But, like most of them in the same fix, you found that you couldn't do it. Then you began to look around for some means of covering up your crime. In your dilemma you thought of a certain man who had left this town as a boy, who had gone to the bad, and whom you had helped—I give you credit for a good heart, Gilles—at various intervals when he needed it. You thought of him. You got him to come here. You told him what you wanted done. You promised that you would give him half of the big sum that you said was inside—and which should have been inside."

"But you knew you were playing with fire in taking this criminal in as your confederate in so dastardly a crime as robbing your own bank. You needed to have that safe blown—to have it appear that the bank had been looted of \$85,000—but you couldn't afford to let a criminal live and know your secret. So you loaded that vault before you locked it the evening before the robbery. You did that—only you could have done it—because you

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