

["Overcoat Bennie"]

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"Overcoat Bennie."

"Overcoat Bennie" was one of the slickest "fences" that ever operated in this country. Bennie was a man of easy grace and fluent tongue as well as a profound optimist. Nothing daunted him. Obstacles made no impression upon him, and so he conquered them.

He came to America from Poland forty odd years ago with high hopes of getting rich as a jeweler and lapidary, a profession at which he had worked in all the important jewel marts of Europe. After a brief career around New York and Boston he turned cheater and finally wound up in a western city as a "fence."

What a cheater he was! He cheated everybody with whom he came in contact, pawnbrokers, crooks and clients. "Flim-flam others or they will flim-flam you," was his motto.

"I do not expect to die in this country," he used to say, "someday I will go back to Poland and buy an estate and live like a nobleman."

He had a system all his own. Crooks couldn't walk in on him unceremoniously and dicker a bundle of loot as they did with other "fences." Indeed not. The boys had to telephone for appointments. Bennie transacted all his business on the streets, on a ferry-boat,

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in an automobile or in the middle of a lot. No detective ever got an earfull of Bennie's conversations with his clients.

On that first “meet” he inspected the swag and set a price and arranged a second “meet.” There was always a second “meet,” because Bennie never bought anything until he had first found a customer for the loot. When the dicker with the crook had been consummated he made a quick turn over and thereby avoided the possibility of being arrested with stolen property in his possession. And very often he didn't even handle the loot. He would have the crook connect with the customer. He was always figuring on eventualities, “out-guessing the cops”, he called it. He thought our American cops were saps.

Like many American “fences,” Bennie frequently planned robberies for the boys. He knew who was who in the city and he knew what they owned in the line of jewels. There was a rumor abroad that he had an inside track with several crooked insurance company dicks.

For ten long years “Overcoat” enjoyed a phenomenal run of good fortune while other “fences” were falling into the hands of the law and beating trails to the gates of San Quentin Prison. He attributed his good fortune to his system, playing safe and “outguessing the cops.”

He was forever boasting of his triumphs. One night he decided, sitting in the Poodle Dog Cafe, that he was about ready to pull up stakes and go back to Poland and buy that estate. He had one more “big job” up his sleeve and then he was through with America. It was to be his “coup de maitre.”

Wherever crooks congregate today there you will hear the story of “Overcoat Bennie's coup de maitre.” It was one of the cleverest pieces of double dealing and double crossing that was ever pulled off in the American underworld and Bennie — well, here are the details of the Polish fancy thinker's “coup de maitre.”

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It begins with St. Louis Jimmy's arrival in the city with a \$25,000 necklace which consisted of twenty seven emeralds and twenty six marquise diamonds set in platinum. James had stolen the "slang" from a bedroom wall safe of a New York banker's home. As all the stones were registered the fences of the East refused to do business with Jimmy. Bennie was wise to this fact therefore he proceeded to flim-flam the prowler.

A thousand dollars was his top price, he told Jimmy. He could take it or leave it. The emeralds weren't so hot, "Overcoat" pointed out. Nor were the diamonds. Jimmy pocketed the money and departed with an oath on his lips. He knew that Bennie had flim-flammed him but he couldn't do anything about it. A thousand dollars was better than nothing. Moreover, he was in danger while he had the "slang" in his possession.

Immediately a great idea was born in Bennie's twisted brain. He believed that he could "doctor" the necklace, give it a pedigree and peddle it for a least \$35,000.

First he recut the emeralds, changing them from hexagonal to octagonal. But he couldn't grind out those "feathers", the finger-prints of stones, by which they are registered and identified. Every stone, ruby, diamond and emerald is marked with certain streaks. The same streaks are seldom, if ever, found in two stones. This is why jewelers call them fingerprints. But Bennie didn't stop there. He substituted pearls for the marquise diamonds and then, when he conceived the idea of giving the necklace a pedigree, he substituted gold settings for the platinum. He realized that he couldn't tell an intelligent prospect that a necklace with platinum settings had once adorned the royal neck of the Empress Alexandra of Russia, consort of Nicholas the First, because platinum was not used in those distant days. Bennie was a great fellow for details. He was always anticipating eventualities, always figuring on "outguessing the cops."

In due course he found a juicy prospect, "Spud" Gilhooley a heads-I-win-and-tails-you-lose gambler who had dealt many a hand from the bottom of a stacked deck to credulous suckers. "Spud" was the boss of the Barbary Coast red light district, too.

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An Empress's necklace! "Spud" went for that one hook, line, and sinker. And only thirty five gran. Well! Well! Some bargain, he thought. It would look swell around his sweetheart's neck, "Little Sadie", a Barbary Coast hustler. Sadie would love it, he thought. And so he bought the necklace when Bennie assured him that there was no chance of a boomerang. How could there be a boomerang, Bennie said, when he, himself, had smuggled it into the U. S. A. from Russia?

Sadie became the talk of the underworld. "Spud" was some "daddy." her envious friends said. here

They wished that they had daddies like him. Not every fancy thinking daddy of Subterranea could afford to decorate his moll's neck with a thirty five gran "slang."

Well, St. Louis Jimmy heard about "Spud's" generosity and decided to look into the matter and one night he "copped a sneak" into Sadie's apartment and lassoed the necklace while she slept. Immediately hell broke loose throughout the underworld. "Spud" hit the war path, gun in hand swearing vengeance. His first stop was Bennie's flat.

"Listen," he put his gun against Bennie's stomach, "I got a hunch that that slang will come back to you. You're the only fence in town that could handle a deal like it. If it comes back to you and you don't tip me off I'll kill you. Savvy?"

"Don't worry," said Bennie, "I'll tip you if it comes back."

As "Spud" exited through one door, St. Louis Jimmy entered through another.

"Well, rat," Jimmy snarled and whipped out the necklace, "hand over thirty five gran, quick, or I'll fill you full of lead."

Bennie turned white and blinked like a horse with the blind staggers. That estate in Poland was drifting farther and farther away with each passing second. The gods were against

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him. That this thing should happen to him just as he was getting ready to pull up stakes! It was terrible! Presently he saw Jimmy's hand go to his hip pocket and come out with a gleam of steel. With chattering teeth he pleaded for a "break." The prowler's lips parted in a singularly venomous smile.

"A break, eh? "he hissed." Did you ever give anybody a break? I'm givin' you the contents of this gat if you don't kick in thirty five gran, pronto."

Bennie kicked in. Jimmy grabbed the money and backed away to the door and delivered a valedictory which sent the blood trickling through "Overcoat's" veins like ice water.

"Crack to Gilhooley about this matter," he said, "and I'll come back and kill you."

Benny nodded and toppled into a chair. Now, he was "in the middle" for the first time in his life. If he squealed on Jimmy he was jeopardizing his life and if he didn't and "Spud" ever got wise it would be "curtains" for him just the same. He saw but one way out of the "jam." He'd go to work on the necklace again, convert it into its original condition and turn it over to his old friend Sam Pinelli, the pawnbroker, a sharpshooter with whom he had staged many a shady deal. Sam agreed that it was his only "out." He had customers beyond the underworld to whom he could sell the necklace. "Good old Sam" had never failed him.

A few hours after Bennie had delivered the necklace to Sam he was found in an alley, his fat, well fed body riddled with bullets. Those of the underworld who were "in the know" on the necklace transaction put two and two together and got five. We thought "Spud" Gilhooley had killed Bennie. "Spud's" disappearance from his Barbary Coast rendezvous strengthened the hunch. But imagine our surprise when the police found his body in a water front lumber yard the following day? We were as mystified as the cops. The coroner's announcement that "Spud" had been killed before Bennie pyramided the mystery.

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But, as the boys say, it all came out in the wash when a Chicago actress, playing a local theatre, applied to a well known insurance company for a \$25,000 policy on her diamond and emerald necklace.

Those diamonds and emeralds looked strangely familiar to the company's sleuths and appraisers and so they turned to their files and waded through their "robbery and wanted" circulars on registered jewels, circulated by the Jewelers Protective Association. Those tell-tale "feathers," the fingerprints of stones, gave them the answer. It was the necklace that St. Louis Jimmy had stolen from the bedroom wall safe of the New York banker's home. Of course the actress confessed that she had bought it from Sam Pinelli and Sam admitted that he got it from "Overcoat Bennie." That, however, was ALL that Sam admitted.

He did not tell the police that after he got the necklace he immediately telephoned St. Louis Jimmy that Bennie had tipped off "Spud" Gilhooley and that "Spud" was gunning for him. He waited until he heard that Jimmy had killed "Spud" and Bennie before he tried to sell the necklace.

Sam "kicked the bucket" in San Quentin Prison. And St. Louis Jimmy? He was shot to death in the latter part of January 1901, while trying to dynamite his way out of the Tennessee State Prison at Nashville with Ed Carney alias "New York Hutch," Gus Hite, a train robber, and a number of other big shot fancy thinkers of the underworld. A bloody tale? Yes, but what a moral it packs! You can't beat old John Law!