

THE CERTIFIED CHECK

By Henry Gallup Paine

Drawings by J. V. McFall

ABEL LORING, senior partner of Loring & Co., one of the largest and most influential firms in the financial district, hung up the receiver and turned from the telephone with an expression of keen annoyance on his kindly face. Touching a button on the side of his desk, he said to the alert young woman who answered the summons:

"Miss Marshall, please place a memorandum conspicuously on Mr. Carleton's desk to come to me the instant he reaches the office. He is expected back from Chicago this morning, and should be here now—only he isn't."

"Yes, he is."

The door had opened to admit the junior member of the firm just in time to let him catch the latter part of Loring's instructions to his secretary.

"Anything gone wrong?" Carleton asked, as he greeted the elder man cordially, with a pleasant smile for the secretary, who flushed slightly as she acknowledged his salutation and returned to her desk in the outer office.

JOHN, there seems to be some unhappy fatality associated with your absences from the office," Loring said gravely, as Carleton sat down. "President Hasselmann of the Roosevelt Trust Company has just called us up to say that our name has been forged to a check for ninety thousand dollars!"

"What!" Carleton leaped to his feet in excitement.

"Not only that," pursued his partner, "but it seems that the check, which was drawn on the Fourth National Bank of Orange, where we keep our Jersey account, was actually certified by Wilson, the paying teller. It was presented for payment at the Roosevelt Trust just at the close of business on Saturday. Those are all the particulars I have. Hasselmann seemed averse to discussing the matter over the telephone. You'd better go up to see him right away. Williams, president of the Fourth National, is holding the check out there, instead of returning it to the Roosevelt, as he should have done. I don't quite understand why he is doing this, and neither does Hasselmann; but perhaps, on account of the check's bearing the certification stamp of the Fourth National, he wishes to investigate the matter himself first, instead of putting it up to the Roosevelt Trust. He has told Hasselmann, however, that it would be returned, formally protested, this afternoon. Of course, the Roosevelt Trust will have to stand the loss; but—"

"You don't mean to tell me the Teddy Trust cashed it, chief?" roared Carleton.

"That's just what they did."

"Well, that bright young institution is likely to have a brief but exciting career if it conducts its business in that easygoing fashion. As you say, it's their funeral; but we seem to have been selected for pallbearers, so I guess it would be as well for me to take a look at the remains. The forger must have used one of our blank checks. What was the number? Have you had the stubs examined?"

"No, John. I just got the news as you came in. You'll have to look into all those details yourself. They're more in your line than mine. I hope that no one in the office is involved."

"I hope not," said Carleton. "Still, some one may have been careless. Of course, as I've told you before, chief, a baby could imitate that signature of yours; but— Oh, I'll get up to the Teddy Trust as soon as the subway will take me there, and then I'll hit the pike for Orange, see the check, and learn what Williams knows. To whose order was the check drawn?"

"To Howard Curtiss & Co., and by them indorsed over to—I don't believe Hasselmann mentioned the name. He seemed a little rattled. You'd better go and talk with him yourself. He'll give you all the facts."

CARLETON stopped only long enough to examine the checkbook and to assure himself that none of the checks had been taken from it, and then hastened up town. He found the president of the Roosevelt Trust in a very unhappy frame of mind.

"I'm mighty glad you've come, Mr. Carleton,"

Hasselmann said. "I knew I could count on your firm's hearty coöperation in running down the forger and helping our customer to recover the money we paid him, and for which we shall have to hold him, though perfectly innocent in the affair, responsible. Ninety thousand dollars is no trifle—"

"Precisely," said Carleton, pricking up his ears at the new turn given to the mystery by Hasselmann's reference to a customer and his disavowal of liability for the loss. "How did you happen to pay out so large an amount in cash?"

"Well, Mr. Carleton, I must take the blame, if there is any, for that. The check was presented by a gentleman who has had an account with us ever since we started—not so very long ago, as you know. His balances are often considerably larger than the amount of the check he requested us to cash for him. Mr. Porter, our paying teller, brought the check to me just at the close of business Saturday, with the word that Mr. Lessing would be greatly obliged if—"

"Mr. whom, did you say?" interposed Carleton

Williams over the telephone this morning that the paper was a forgery."

"How did it come you did not hear from the Fourth National until this morning, Tuesday?" asked Carleton.

"Why, you see, Mr. Carleton, we do not correspond directly with the Orange bank, but clear our New Jersey business through the Mellor Trust Company of Newark. The check was sent out from here Saturday afternoon, arrived in Newark on Monday morning, went to Orange at the close of business Monday, and was received by the Fourth National the first thing this morning. Of course, if we had corresponded directly with the Fourth National, we should have known of the forgery a day sooner, yesterday. I have been trying all the morning to get into communication with Mr. Lessing, but without avail. His cashier informs me that he left for Chicago on Saturday night."

"Yes," said Carleton; "I saw him there."

"Did you? That's odd," exclaimed Hasselmann. "Well, he isn't there now. I called up the Lorraine, where I was told he was staying, and learned that he started east yesterday afternoon."

"H'm. He wasn't on the Flyer," was Carleton's comment. "The check, as I understand it, was made out to the order of Curtiss & Co?" he continued interrogatively.

"Yes, and was indorsed over to Mr. Lessing by that firm," replied Hasselmann.

"To him personally, or to Francis Lessing & Co.?"

"To him personally. For that reason, I could obtain no information about it at his office. The house does considerable business with Howard Curtiss & Co.; but no one knew anything of a ninety thousand-dollar check due or expected from that firm. I had to word my questions carefully, as I do not wish any inkling of the trouble to get out at this time."

"Then the only steps you have taken so far have been to notify us and to make a few guarded inquiries of Lessing & Co.'s cashier?"

"That is the worst of it, Mr. Carleton," the president said gravely. "In times of financial unrest and distrust like the present, it is important to avoid publicity in such—er—matters, so far as possible. And while, as I have said and believe, this company cannot be held ultimately liable for the money, we are out ninety thousand dollars to-day. Rumor begets rumor, and if the fact was known it might cause us no little embarrassment, though I should hardly look for a run on the company's deposits. We were drawn on very heavily yesterday and to-day, and while, of course, our institution is splendidly solvent and flourishing, we are a young concern, and, as you know, public confidence is easily shaken. I have heard reports of your skill in such matters, and as it was the name of your firm that was used, I thought you might naturally like to—"

"Take up the investigation personally?" finished Carleton.

"Why, yes," assented Hasselmann. "It hardly seems fair to our customer, Mr. Lessing, who is also a depositor in the Fourth National, to give the facts to the police until we can consult with him. Mr. Williams feels the same way."

"Well, you're quite right," said Carleton; "I shall enter upon this investigation with peculiar relish. I have just time to get the twelve-ten train for Orange, if I start now," and he was soon on his way to the ferry at 23d-st.

IN the thirty-minute trip on the train, Carleton turned the affair over and over in his mind; but the more he looked at it, the more perplexing it became to him.

If Lessing was the forger, there seemed to be no possible escape for him. Even if he got clear away with the money, he could never hope to return to New York, and Carleton wondered if the man's affairs were in such desperate straits that he had actually been driven to overt crime in order to raise funds with which to escape from the country and go into hiding. It hardly seemed possible. There was apparently no indication of anything wrong at Lessing's office, and Lessing himself had been in Chicago only the day before, operating openly in the wheat market. Carleton had known that the man was a crook by nature, ever since their college days, when he had caught his classmate in financial irregularities that had brought about Lessing's expulsion; but he believed that the broker was far too clever now to present for payment a check that he himself had forged.

The shout of the brakeman as the train pulled



"You Do Understand," Said Carleton, "and This Is My Reply."

quickly. Hasselmann had spoken the name of a broker whose underhand practices had cost Carleton's firm a large amount of money, until the junior partner had detected his methods and blocked his game.

"Mr. Lessing, Mr. Francis Lessing. I thought I told Mr. Loring he was the depositor who presented the check. At any rate, I saw him myself, and he said he wished to use the money at once. I did not like to refuse him the accommodation for which he asked—he had only to deposit the check and to draw against it, when we should have been compelled to honor his draft. Accordingly, I directed the teller to give him the money. Before doing this, however, I called up the Fourth National of Orange and asked for Mr. Williams, the president. I was informed that both he and the cashier had left early; but I got Wilson, the paying teller who had certified the check. He said the check was all right. You can imagine my surprise when I was informed by Mr.