

Swindle Most Amazing

Story of Biggest Bunko Game of Modern Times

What is justly regarded as the most stupendous swindle of modern times has just come to light in Paris. The principals in the swindle have fled after having borrowed \$10,000,000 on a mythical fortune alleged to have been devised to one of the swindlers by an American millionaire.

It is an amazing story—most amazing. It is the story of the greatest and most astounding fraud of modern times—a twenty million dollar fraud, a one hundred million franc romance, concocted in the brains of two shrewd women who have lived for twenty years on the proceeds of the credulity of those who believed it. Those pro-



MME. HUMBERT ENTERED PARISIAN SOCIETY.

ceeds, it is said today, were at least \$10,000,000 of borrowed money, borrowed on the strength of a mythical fortune locked up in an empty safe.

To begin at the beginning of this story of a phantom fortune we must go back twenty years, when a Mr. Henry Robert Crawford died at Nice after a lingering illness, during which he had been nursed devotedly by a lovely young French lady, Mile. Therese d'Aurignac.

In course of time the romantic news crept out that this Mr. Crawford was very much of a millionaire. The figures 100,000,000 francs slipped easily off the tongue in mentioning his money, and as most Americans are reputed in France to be very rich it was easy to believe that he was one of them, though to tell the truth nobody on this side of the Atlantic had ever heard of Henry Robert Crawford, the millionaire.

When it was found that the grateful man had left his entire estate to the devoted little mademoiselle who nursed him in his last illness, it seemed such a natural thing to do that the matter was accepted as of course. Mile. Therese d'Aurignac was looked upon as a very lucky young woman. Fortune smiled upon her. She married M. Frederick Humbert, ex-deputy for Seine and Marne and son of M. Humbert, minister of justice in M. de Freycinet's cabinet of 1882. She entered Parisian society as one who had rights both of birth and money—particularly money—and when she asked for credit, her story having been published and being public property, it was showered upon her.

But now there come upon the scene new actors. There are a Mr. Henry Crawford and a Mr. Robert Crawford, Americans, either of whom was as rich as the deceased Robert Henry Crawford, and to neither of whom were ten millions or so of any particular object. But they brought with them a last will and testament of the deceased Robert Henry Crawford, and they said that for the principal of the thing they must demand that its provisions be carried out.

By this will Mme. Humbert received a mere bagatelle of an annuity of 38,000 francs. The remainder of the immense fortune was to be divided in three equal portions, one for Mr. Robert Crawford, one for Mr. Henry Crawford and one for Mme. Humbert's little sister, Mile. Marie d'Aurignac. Here was a complication, to be sure!

The Crawfords were generous. One of the heirs said he would marry the first heiress and thus keep the money in the family and not bother the courts about the matter. When it was pointed out that Mme. Humbert was married already, he said all right—he would wait till the little sister grew up and marry her instead. This served to keep matters in statu quo for several years, during which the Humberts borrowed assiduously, and the banks and trust companies and merchants lent with a glad heart. Whenever they grew weary of lending or began to talk of reimbursement the legal romance assumed a new phase.

At eighteen the young Mile. d'Aurignac refused to marry the Crawford heir to whom she was pledged. This raised a terrible hullabaloo. The heirs at once announced very publicly

through their counsel that they would now contest the Crawford will. A battle was begun which lasted, as legal battles will when both lawyers and clients are willing, for years. It has not been finished yet. There were decisions one way and decisions the other way. There were appeals and counter appeals. The case appeared to have no ending.

And throughout these appeals and counter appeals and counter counter appeals no one ever saw Robert or Henry Crawford, the litigants. It is remembered now that they never made an appearance in court. Everything was done through attorneys. And still the money was borrowed.

All this time it was universally understood that the securities representing the immense fortune of the late Mr. Crawford lay snugly ensconced in a burglar proof safe in the mansion of the Humberts. By a mutual agreement, it was given out, the different parties to the controversy were content to let them remain there until the courts rendered final judgment on the claims. Once a year, so the pretty romance went, the different parties, with their solicitors, opened the safe and counted the securities and locked them up again when it was found that they were all correct. But one thing was made manifest to all outsiders interested in the Humbert-Crawford millions. If Mme. Humbert touched any of those securities, she forfeited all right to their possession. This was nominated in the bond.

But now the drama hastens to a tragic end. Messrs. Girard & Co. have loaned to Mme. Humbert on her mythical expectations the sum of 6,200,000 francs. They are her heaviest creditors. They have lent the money at usurious rates, as did all who fell victim to the woman's specious story. She contested the suit for repayment, and M. Girard, the banker, committed suicide in despair of ever seeing his money again. The liquidator then applies to M. Waldeck-Rousseau as a barrister. The latter goes to Roubaix and in his pleading describes the affair as a monster swindle. He gets a judgment for the Humberts to repay 2,500,000 francs to the liquidator of the Girard bank, and the tribunal also orders the contents of the famous safe to be taken possession of. The Humberts, however, settle with the creditors, and the safe remains intact. But how was this arranged? The barrister who was then acting for the Humberts, but is no longer doing so, one of the most respectable men at the bar, is said to have advanced the 2,500,000 francs.

This staves off disclosure for a time, but only for a time. The statements made by M. Waldeck-Rousseau have started the worm of suspicion. Other creditors take the alarm. There is a demand upon the courts, the government, to order the opening of the famous safe and the disclosure of the millions which are supposed to be hidden in it. Permission is at last granted. The safe is to be opened at 1 p. m. on a certain day. At 10 a. m. there are 300 persons before the door. At 1 there are 1,000. The official personages arrive. They demand entrance. Where are M. and Mme. Humbert? They are not at home. They have fled, it is said, to England or the United States. The safe is forced open.

It is a good safe. It takes the locksmiths five hours to open it. And what



NOTHING WAS FOUND IN THE SAFE. do they find? Nothing! Nothing worth mentioning—some dusty old papers of no value, a rusty buckle and a few discarded envelopes. That is all. When the news reaches the crowd in the street, the people hold their breath with horror and amazement. They realize then, at least they believe, that they stand in the shadow of the greatest, the most gigantic swindle of the age.

Now that it is all over people are talking about the colossal stupidity of the losers and the incredible credulity which enabled them to believe the romance of these shrewd women and to advance vast sums without making a more careful investigation as to the standing of the mythical Crawfords. But greed was ever stupid, and the easiest way in all the world to make money is to touch the pocket nerve of the intended victim and make him believe he is going to get something for nothing.

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