

The Strange Adventures of Christopher Poe

Stories of Strange Cases Solved in Secret by a Banker-Detective

By ROBERT CARLTON BROWN

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THE GOLD SWEATERS

Christopher Poe, dog-tired, turned off the light, and fell asleep, sprawled at full length on a roomyavenport. It was after midnight when he stirred for the first time, stretched languidly, and opened his eyes. In a moment he realized that he was in his own rooms, and the discomfort of having slept in his clothes became apparent.

A soft-chiming clock in the next room sounded in unison with the door-bell.

The door-bell rang again. Poe listened for his man to answer, but there was not a step to be heard in reply.

"Couldn't be anybody but a night watchman at this hour—or—Burns!" exclaimed the banker, straightening his rumpled clothes and stepping into the hall. With anticipatory eagerness he swung wide the apartment door.

"Hello, Burns!" he cried. "Guessed it was you. But you ought to be home in bed."

"No, No. I had enough sleep. I can't drug myself with it as you do. I was at the office by three this afternoon." Burns hurried in, slammed the door behind him, looked about anxiously to make sure that Poe was alone, glanced at his friend's clothes, and smiled.

"You have been sleeping since I left?" he queried.

"Every minute!" exclaimed Poe. "And I feel like a boy. Though I would like to pull these things off and get into something decent."

"Keep 'em on, keep 'em on," said Burns, dropping into a lounge leather chair and exhaling a long, pent-up breath.

Poe stood tall and straight by comparison to his friend hunched in the chair, though he was a little below average height. Stepping to a switch in the wall, he turned on a light which illumined Burns' face.

"Something new in the bad-money game?" he asked, as Burns pulled forth his right hand, which had been thrust deep in his pocket, and threw open his clenched fingers, displaying three gold coins on his moist palm.

"They're badly worn!" observed Poe.

"It's Uncle Sam's own money this time," answered Burns. "You're right, they're worn. And look at the date!"

Poe picked up the double eagle which lay between two single ones, and whistled his surprise as he read the date, "1913."

"Worst of it is," continued Burns, "they stuck our own bank on them. Every branch uptown had been taking them for a week or two."

A worried look came into his face; he leaned forward anxiously, looking at the coins. "I can't make head nor tail out of this thing."

"Head and tail seem to be about the same," replied Christopher Poe, weighing the coin on his finger tips, sensitive through years of actual money-handling in bank-tellers' cages, and still kept in practice by his avocation of solving crimes against banks.

"Feels like the vintage of '72, and yet dated this year," he continued. "They must have used an entirely new process in sweating. It can't be acid; the edges are never worn this thin, and the letters would be sharper. You see that it is quite smoothed down, particularly at the centers."

"Yes, I know. I had an idea or two on the thing myself, but I'm all bailed up on it," agreed Burns. "They're all this year's coins that have been tampered with, and they're worn as consistently smooth as that ten-dollar gold piece you read about, with which the fellow paid back what he had borrowed from his friend, and the friend paid his tailor, the tailor paid the coin to the doctor, the doctor gave it to the grocer and the grocer—"

"By the way," cut in Poe, hefting another of the reduced coins on his sensitive finger tips, "didn't a lot of this light stuff come in through the grocers?"

"Why, yes," cried Burns. "How'd you know that? Confound it! I worked all evening getting information on that. I knew I'd never be able to handle this alone."

"Good! The minute you said uptown I thought of the grocers in that particular part of Manhattan island. There's a reason. You'll know why later."

Christopher Poe smiled dreamily; his violet eyes, usually vivid, became vague, and he absently picked up a granite paper weight, placed one of the gold coins flat on its face against the stone, and rubbed it back and forth for two or three minutes musingly. At length he turned to Burns, who sat with fingers knit contemplatively, his gaze fixed on the paper weight and coin in Christopher Poe's fingers.

"There's been nobody at all sweating coins since that Denver gang was caught three years ago, has there?" Poe asked.

"No. I can't remember even any small sweating being reported."

Christopher Poe smiled broadly, the corners of his lips joining his nostrils in deep wrinkles, as they invariably did when he was lost in thought.

"New York is such a silly place for any one to try passing lightened gold coins. Now, as a criminal, one might fancy San Francisco, Denver, Seattle,

any city near the other coast where they are more apt to test paper currency with their teeth than metal money. But then," Poe laughed, "they are the greatest children in the world," his lips drew down soberly, "but the nastiest rascals on earth to deal with."

"Who? Criminals, you mean?" cried Burns, leaning forward, having failed to catch the connection.

"No, Sicilians."

"Sicilians! What about them? You were talking about criminals."

"I know, but I was thinking all the time about those broad-shouldered, swaggering, swarthy fellows from the wondrous Italian isle."

"Then you think there is a gang of Sicilians behind this flux of defalcated money?"

"Oh, it's only the merest notion," Poe hurriedly assured Burns, who was by this time sitting on the absolute edge of his chair, endeavoring to read Poe's theory in his manner. "The only thing we know is that grocers, dealers in butter and eggs, vegetables and the like, have been depositing these puny coins quite generally in uptown New York."

"That's all. But how in the world do you gather from that that the people behind this thing are Sicilians?"

"I'm not sure yet. But if you can't sleep and want to make a night of it, I'm game," answered Poe, glancing at the clock.

"What do you mean? What can we do at one o'clock in the morning?" asked Burns, curiously.

"Well, in the first place we can get ready," Poe switched on another drop light, and stretched across a low cabinet to a telephone on a swinging iron arm. He hooked the phone into a comfortable position and called a number. Securing the man he wanted, he asked that an ordinary grocery wagon and an old horse be ready for him at three-thirty that morning.

"A grocery wagon? What's that for?" asked Burns, as Poe hung up the receiver.

"Well, if you can't figure it out, I'm not going to tell you," answered Poe, drawing a highly polished chess-set from a case beneath the davenport.

"But at three-thirty in the morning! A grocery wagon! I don't get you, Chris!" The other looked at him quizzically.

"Oh, I forgot. Before I beat you at a game of chess, I'll rig you out in lowly clothes, like mine." Poe disappeared into his dressing-room, returning in ten minutes with a threadbare golf sweater, a dented and dusty derby, a celluloid collar, a ready-tied fore-in-hand, and a neat, Germanic, square cut suit, which he dumped into Burns' lap, and leisurely arranged the men on the chess-board, playing against himself until Burns returned, looking like a thrifty German grocer.

They sat down before the board, and played in silence until the clock chimed three-thirty. At the stable a broken-spirited nag and a rickety grocery wagon awaited them.

Mounting the driver's seat together, the brother bankers drove out and cross-town to First avenue. It was quite dark, and there were very few wagons astray at that hour, other than milk and bakery carts.

Poe whipped the horse into a choppy trot, and they bounced over the pavement up First avenue, talking but little. When they reached the "nineties," Burns asked abruptly:

"Are you going to the Harlem Market?"

"That's it," answered Poe. "We're almost there. I've decided it'll be best to try the small Italian dealers first."

"So that's how you jumped to the conclusion that the sweaters were Sicilians? You knew if the small merchants uptown possessed shrunk gold they probably got it down here at their wholesale market?"

"That's it. The market is full of Italian dealers, and is a pretty good distributing point for coins that have been tampered with. But here we are. Take this."

Poe extracted eight fifty-dollar bills and ten twenties from a supply of large bills he had removed from his safe before starting. "Mingle with the crowd as though you were a grocer, buy anything small from Italians only, and look sharp for gold change."

Finding a narrow space between two trucks, Poe backed his wagon in quite skillfully, and leaped down over a pile of lemon crates. Burns followed, and they separated on reaching the cluttered walk.

Poe canvassed his side of the street for two blocks, either buying something or asking for change at each Italian wholesale store. Much disappointed at receiving no gold except two five-dollar pieces, which showed no signs of having been tampered with, Poe returned to his wagon, where he met Burns, who had secured three ten-dollar gold pieces in change; but on inspection these, too, proved to be as fresh and unsullied as when they came from the mint.

"Well, we seem to be on the wrong scent," admitted Poe with a shrug of his shoulders. "There are only a few

scattering shops left; we caught the market at its flood, and if there were any of these sweated coins in the neighborhood, it seems to me we would have had some."

"I'm hungry," replied Burns. "Let's get a bite to eat somewhere. The sight of all this foodstuff has made me ravenous; and you must remember we haven't had much breakfast."

They crossed to the restaurant Burns had indicated. It stretched the length of five cheap-curtained windows, and along it ran an old weather-beaten sign printed in purple and red, "Ristorante del Etna." With its lurid representation of a volcano, the old sign itself gave a romantic, devil-may-care aspect to the place.

"I rather like the look of this!" cried Poe, glancing around the big dining room as soon as they were inside, seated at an oil-cloth-covered table.

"Looks more like Naples than America," said Burns.

"Or Sicily," replied Poe, pointing to a crucifix on the wall opposite. "That is Sicilian workmanship."

There were only three other customers in the place, Italians all, juggling with macaroni and meat for breakfast, an acquired American habit.

The cook, a tall cadaverous creature, a perfect giraffe of a fellow, with the proud mien of an amiable eagle, came striding out of his kitchen like a grenadier, and smiled hesitantly.

"What you want maybe?"

"Oh, some ham and eggs—anything American you can get in a hurry."

"English. Bifsteak. Hamneggs!" grinned the cookless cook, wiping his hands on his apron, hanging slack.

"Alla right. Blemby maybe."

He turned, and stalked measuredly to his kitchen door, stooping his high shoulders and ducking his head beneath the six-foot portal topped with the sign:

INGRESSO PROIBITO.

"Seems to be particular about his kitchen," remarked Poe, reading the

"Alla right. Alla right," came a good-natured growl from the kitchen. The cook left off stirring his stove, and came out directly.

"He always busy backs dere. You hava to pound da table to make him hear."

Giovanni smiled indulgently toward his detractor, and in answer to Poe's question of "Quanto?" replied, "Sixty cent."

Poe pulled out his change, counted it over, found it insufficient, and hesitantly drew out a twenty-dollar bill, proffering it apologetically, with the remark, "It's the smallest I have. Can you change it?"

A greedy light snapped in the deep-set eyes of the tall cook. Two little spots of color appeared near his high cheek-bones as he went through his pockets and found only three or four dollars. Stepping to a cupboard in the corner, he unlocked a drawer, and drew out ragged bills to the amount of fifteen dollars, and finally piced out the change.

Poe handed back ten one-dollar bills.

"By the way," he asked, "have you a gold piece for this? I'd rather have it."

Giovanni shot a surprised glance from beneath his twisty brows, and shook his head, "No ondrastan."

The Italian customer translated, but Giovanni only hunched his shoulders, and threw out the palms of his hands in a hopeless shrug, giving to understand that ten-dollar gold pieces were quite beyond his ken.

"What did you make out of that fellow?" asked Burns when they were on the street again.

"He's an odd one. Happy-go-lucky. Seems to be master of his own restaurant. Sort of a go-as-you-please place, wasn't it?"

"He had such a romantic look—like a reformed pirate."

"Why a reformed one?" smiled Poe.

"But here, the market trading is al-

dish before a customer at a front table.

Quick as a flash Poe turned into an alley which ran behind the restaurant, and made his way stealthily to the rear. There a small stoop indicated the back door to the restaurant, which Poe knew, from the plan of the interior fixed in his mind, led outward from the kitchen.

He sneaked up to within a foot of the small vestibule, and stood flat against the outside kitchen wall, in such a position that he would not be seen by chance from any of the windows looking onto the alley.

He stood for five minutes listening hopefully. Finally he heard Giovanni enter the kitchen and stride to the stove, which he knew from the location of the pipe was near the vestibule door.

The steps stopped, and Poe held his breath as the same sound of tinkering with the stove came to his ears. A moment later Giovanni walked into the vestibule and began sifting ashes. Poe stood motionless and silent, listening intently.

In a minute or so Giovanni was called away to serve a customer. Poe slipped up the steps to the small entryway and quickly lifted the lid off a rickety ash-barrel standing there. Plunging his hand in, he pulled out a fistful of ordinary stove ashes, and thrust it into his outside pocket.

He darted down the steps and through the alley to the street, as he heard Giovanni returning.

He joined Burns on the wagon a block away. All their purchases having been gathered up, they drove downtown directly. Poe was reticent beneath Burns' curious questioning.

"I don't know that I have anything worked out," he said finally, having shown Burns the sweated coins received from the last dealer, "but here is something tangible at least." He held his coat-pocket open and showed the handful of stove ashes.

"But what on earth has that to do with these shrunk coins?"

"I don't know for certain that it has anything to do with them, but I'm going to find out. I'll call you up about noon if things work out the way I think they will, so you can be in at the finish."

Poe hopped down from the wagon, and walked cross-town to an office building on Broadway. There he dumped out the handful of ashes on a piece of paper in the office of a chemist friend, held a short conversation with the man, and at twelve o'clock went to his rooms, called up the chemist, held a short conversation with him which seemed entirely satisfactory, and then phoned Burns, saying simply:

"Everything is in hand now. Meet me here at once."

Burns came, still dressed as a merchant. Poe called up a taxicab office, left an order, and then took a Third avenue street car uptown, alighting at 104th street, having blocked all of Burns' attempts to find out what had passed in the hours they had been apart.

"You enjoyed Giovanni's cooking so much this morning I thought you'd like to lunch here today," said Poe, pushing open the door to the "Ristorante del Etna" as they reached it.

The place was deserted but for three or four Italian customers, and when Giovanni came out to take their orders he seemed quite pleased that the merchants had seen fit to continue their patronage.

Poe ordered quite a splendid meal for such a modest restaurant, and Giovanni busied himself in the kitchen; for whatever else he was, he was a good cook.

Once Poe reached over, and touched Burns' arm significantly. It was when Giovanni made a clattering with the doors of his carefully tended stove.

The meal came on, and was eaten with relish. Twice Giovanni left his work in the kitchen, and peered benignly through the little serving-window to make sure that his customers were well provided for.

When Poe called him finally and put the question, "Quanto costa?" Giovanni looked at him sharply as he produced a five-dollar gold piece with which to pay.

The cook seemed ill at ease, and had some difficulty figuring up the price of the meal with his stubby pencil.

Meanwhile Poe held out the gold piece toward Burns and remarked: "Pretty badly used for a 1913 coin, isn't it?"

Burns agreed, glanced wonderingly from Poe's tense features to Giovanni's glowering face.

"Somebody has stolen a dollar's worth of gold from that coin," continued Poe, paying no attention to Giovanni. He reached into his pocket, and pulled out the two tens and the twenty-dollar gold piece given him by the Italian wholesale grocer.

Giovanni stooped down, peering over Poe's shoulder with ominous gaze, his fingers fumbling with the account he had been penciling.

"See!" cried Poe to Burns. "These coins have been worn down in the same way. Each one is minus two or three dollars' worth of good gold," he went on, with impressive emphasis, feeling Giovanni's hot breath on his forehead.

He turned to the cook, and held up one of the sweated gold pieces between thumb and forefinger.

"Giovanni," he said banteringly, "somebody's squeezed this coin like a sponge. That's good money, but some crook has been tampering with it—"

"No ondrastan," faltered Giovanni, his eyes shifting to the account in his trembling, big brown hand.

"Well, anyway, if I could catch the rascal who has been sweating these coins, I'd make him—"

Giovanni, evidently to cover his confusion, had turned and hurried to the sideboard where he kept his change locked up.

Poe gave a quick sign to Burns, slipped from his chair, and darted through the kitchen door.

Giovanni turned just in time to see Poe's feet disappearing into his private kitchen.

"Andatevene!" he yelled out, whirling around, his face white, his long fingers seeking in the belt beneath his vest.

He lurched forward, leaped across the intervening space, grasped the door-jamb, and swung into the kitchen.

"Christo! Chiodete la porta!" he screamed, springing for Poe, who had stooped before the stove and opened the ash door.

Poe leaped to his feet, evaded Giovanni's clutch with an expert twist, and burst through the outer doorway into the small vestibule, where he snatched up the heavy ash-sifter from the top of a barrel.

Giovanni, his teeth bared, screaming in rage, grasped a long, keen knife from the meat-block, and leaped through the doorway after him.

"Drop that!" yelled Burns, rushing in from behind, revolver drawn and ready.

As the hulking big cook sprang for Poe with his vicious knife, Poe swung with the short-handled ash-sifter and smashed it full force in his frantic face.

"Quick!" Poe signaled to Burns, who stood stupefied as the top of the ash-sifter was smashed in, and its contents whizzed through the air; a stifling cloud of ashes, a patter of clinkers and coal, and, chief of all, a shower of shimmering gold pieces which cut into Giovanni's battered face and whizzed past his head. Gold coins were hurled in all directions from the ash-sifter.

As the cook, dazed and blinded, slashed at Poe with the knife, Burns leaped upon his from behind and pinioned his arms to his side, wresting the blade from him.

A rush of feet was heard in the restaurant, as the customers came to their senses and flew to Giovanni's assistance.

"Through here! Quick!" cried Poe. He caught up a handful of gold pieces that had scattered from the ash-sifter, grabbed Giovanni's legs, and, with Burns supporting the upper part of the cook's body, dashed down the steps into the alley.

A shot rang out from behind as they swung into the street, and shoved the struggling cook into the open door of a taxi that Poe had in waiting two stores below.

Poe dexterously tied the frantic, fighting cook, and by the time he had finished the taxi-driver had stopped in front of the police station.

Poe spoke to a lieutenant, and three plain-clothes men rushed off at once to capture the little wholesale merchant from whom Poe had obtained the sweated twenty and ten-dollar gold pieces. Poe, at his own request, was locked alone in the cell with Giovanni.

After half an hour he came out smiling, and joined Burns, who told him that the wholesale grocer dealer had been easily captured and just locked up. He pressed Poe for an explanation. The banker-detective was jubilant; after disposing of a few details with the police he ordered a taxi, and when they had started for home drew a deep breath and turned to Burns.

"Wasn't it great!" he exclaimed. "Did you think I'd rubbed Aladdin's lamp when I conjured all those gold pieces out of the coal and ashes in the sifter?"

"I didn't know. How on earth did you guess the gold was there?"

"That puzzled me for a while," smiled Poe. "But I slipped around to the back porch, listened for a minute to Giovanni shaking the sifter, and finally took a handful of ashes from a barrel standing there. I took the handful to a chemist friend, and asked him for an analysis for traces of gold. His analysis showed that in the handful of dust was 30 per cent emery and 2 per cent pure gold."

"You don't mean it!" exclaimed Burns excitedly.

"Yes. It startled me too. But I recalled an old unique case in which some sweaters had placed gold coins in a burlap sack, and shaken them until enough dust had been worn off. Then they burned the sacks, and collected the dust that had adhered to the cloth, and sold it through regular jewelers' findings jobbers who buy scrap gold and silver. I just found out from Giovanni that he and his brother had used practically the same method, shipping the carefully made ash-barrels to a secret cellar, where the pure gold was melted from the mixture of ashes, emery, and coal in a big furnace, and sold through a jeweler's findings man who had no suspicion of how the gold was procured. Giovanni's brother attended to that part of it, as well as the passing of the shrunk coins. It was a close corporation."

"His brother?"

"Yes. The grocery wholesaler who gave me the gold coins this morning. The minute he gave me the sweated gold in change I was sure of Giovanni's guilt, for I noted the resemblance between the two men—high cheek bones, square jaws, same complexion and all—and was sure they came from the same family. That was what the whole thing hinged on."

"And a handful of ashes," cried Burns enthusiastically.



"Drop that!" yelled Burns

sign. "Keep out" sounds sullen for our old friend."

A minute later Poe looked from a stuffed bear, left over from some street carnival and now adorning the middle of the room, to the kitchen corner. Nothing could be seen of the interior, for it was enclosed, but the cook could be heard tinkering with his stove and using an ash-sifter at intervals.

"Doesn't seem to pay much attention to our breakfast," remarked Burns. "Seems more absorbed in his stove, if one can judge from the sounds."

"Oh, he'll get through with the breakfast all right. He's one of these methodic old cooks who thinks more of the behavior of his coal-range than the comfort of his guests."

A swarthy Italian entered, and cried, "Giovanni!"

In answer the cook poked his head through a small serving-door in the partition dividing the kitchen from the dining room, and perking his head with a wise roll of his eyes like a parrot in a cage, asked shrilly what the customer wanted.

A dish of macaroni was all. The face darted back, and half a minute later came the same sounds of fusing with the stove.

"He's a most methodic old rascal," smiled Poe. "I'd like to have a look into that kitchen of his, but his forbidding sign scares me out."

At that moment the tall, ominous-eyed Italian stepped forth from his cook-shop, and placed two plates of ham and eggs before the bankers, cooked Italian style, which means the ham was sliced very thin and the eggs were very old.

They ate from hunger, and really relished it. Having finished, Poe took out his purse and called, "Boss!" the Italian-American word for manager or proprietor.

But the cook did not hear. The swarthy Italian customer who had just entered laughed, and shrugged his shoulders. Then he called through the hole in the kitchen partition, "Giovanni! Giovanni!"

most over. You work the small Italian wholesalers on both sides of the cross streets above. I'll cover those below. We'll meet at the wagon again in half an hour."

At the third from the last store in his territory he stopped, and inspected a bunch of bananas.

"Three dolla—three dolla," said the proprietor of the small store with an urging, ingratiating smile.

Christopher Poe looked once at the bananas and twice at the man, making a mental note of the dark Italian's prominent features, and quickly decided, "I'll take three bunches."

He produced a treasured fifty-dollar bill, his last, and handed it to the active little Italian in payment. The merchant seemed pleased with the size of the note, and quickly counted into Poe's hand one twenty and two ten-dollar gold pieces, grinning pleasantly. "No munda da gold, signor?"

"No," answered Poe nonchalantly, for as the coins lay in his palm, without inspecting them closely, he saw that they had been sweated.

When he left the place, all that revealed his success was the triumphant snap in his eyes. He went at once to the wagon, and found Burns awaiting him.

"No luck?" he asked.

"None," said Burns.

Before Burns could question him in turn Poe thrust a list of his purchases into his companion's hand.

"You drive to these places, and have the goods I bought loaded on. I've a little business that'll keep me about half an hour. Pick up all the goods you bought too. We don't want to excite suspicion by paying for anything we don't take away with us."

With these words he darted across the street, and was soon on the walk opposite the "Ristorante del Etna." He glanced through the curtained windows as he passed, in an effort to locate Giovanni's position inside without attracting attention. Not seeing the cook, he walked to the corner and then back. This time he had a glimpse of Giovanni leaning over to place a