The Great South-Eastern Bullion Robbery

By MICHAEL ROBBINS

A LITTLE before eight o'clock in the evening of Tuesday, May 15, 1855, a South Eastern Railway guard walked out of London Bridge Station into the street, wiped his face, and walked back into the station again. At once a man who was sauntering in the street turned away and went quickly to a cab waiting in St. Thomas's Street nearby. There was another man already in it; they drove together up to the station entrance. The two men, wearing cloaks, got out and bought first class tickets to Dover. Each of them handed a rather heavy carpet-bag to a porter to be put in the van of the 8 p.m. mail train. Then they walked up and down the platform, waiting for the train to start.

Just before it did, one of them jumped unobserved into the van and hid in a corner; the other got into a first class compartment. The guard—the same one who had walked out into the street for a moment—gave the "right away"; the train moved off; and then the man hidden in the van emerged, and with the guard's help unlocked an iron safe and took out from it a wooden box. He forced the box open and took from it four bars of gold. He put lead shot into the box in place of the gold, and closed it again. Then the train arrived at Reigate (the station now called Redhill); the guard handed the gold in a bag to a man who came and collected it. This man then took the next up train to London.

During the halt at Reigate the first class passenger joined his companion in the van, and then the train started off again. More boxes were opened, some American gold coins and small bars of gold were taken out and transferred to the carpet-bags, and the space filled up more or less with shot. The boxes were fastened and sealed with seals and a wax taper brought for the purpose, and the safes were locked up again. At Folkestone the safes were removed from the van by railway staff, and the train went on to Dover.

At Dover the two men collected their carpet-bags, and went to the Dover Castle Hotel. They ordered supper, about 11 p.m., and managed to transfer the gold and coins from the carpet-bags to "courier-bags" attached to their belts; and one of them took a walk down to the pier, where he threw a chisel and mallet into the sea. They caught the 2 a.m. train to London, after an embarrassing encounter with a porter who doubted their story about having come from Ostend (there had been no boat in that day). On the way they got rid of the carpet-bags altogether, and on arriving in London took a succession of cabs so as to dodge about and cover their tracks.

After disposing of some coins and gold for ready money, they set up a furnace in a house at Cambridge Villas, Shepherds Bush, to melt down the rest; and if it had not been for a remarkable series of events the South Eastern Railway would never have known how, in spite of an imposing series of security precautions, it had come to be robbed of bullion and coin to the value of more than £15,000. The company was, in fact, very unwilling indeed to believe that the robbery could have happened while the gold was in its charge; several months went by before the directors and officers were driven by the evidence to concede that the safes were continuously under guard from Folkestone through to Paris, and so that the crime must have taken place during the rail journey from London Bridge.

Perhaps the railway police might have discovered some useful clues if they had reflected on one significant piece of evidence which lay in the company's hands. This was the guards' duty rota. At that time, duties on the South Eastern Railway were changed monthly; the rota list was made out in the office of the deputy outdoor superintendent, Mr. J. P. Knight. The list for April, 1855, showed the name of Burgess as guard, with Kennedy as under-guard, of the 8 p.m. mail train, with the words

" and May " added. These were in the handwriting of one Tester, a clerk in the office, who left the railway in September, 1855, and went to Sweden. The importance of this departure from normal practice on the line, in relation to a robbery which could only have been committed with the guard's connivance, now seems too obvious to be missed; but it did not apparently seem so at the time. The South Eastern gave up its investigations, and paid the compensation due to the three firms concerned in December, 1855.

There the whole matter might have remained if a professional thief, Agar by name, had not fallen into trouble with the law about an entirely unconnected matter, of uttering a forged cheque. He was arrested in August, 1856, and sentenced in October to transportation for life; but before this he was able to leave instructions with his associates that they were to see that adequate provision was made, from his share of the bullion robbery proceeds, for a young woman called Fanny Kay, formerly of the refreshment room at Tonbridge Station, with whom, as the Victorians phrased it, he had been on very intimate terms. After one or two payments, the accomplices thought they were safe in forgetting about the obligation; but Fanny Kay managed to get word to Agar, then in detention at the Portland hulks, whereupon he turned Queen's evidence, and the whole story came out. This was it.

The principal in the affair was William Pierce, who was for a time in the service of the South Eastern Railway, in the ticket-printing office. He left in 1850, and at the time of his trial was described as a grocer. His accomplice, who actually performed the opening of the safes, was Edward Agar, a man with a shady record, who returned to England from America some time in 1853. In May, 1854, he met Pierce, and Pierce told him of the frequent shipments of gold bullion on the South Eastern line. Pierce seems to have known all about the Chubb locks of the safes and felt certain he could get impressions of the keys. Agar was doubtful but allowed himself to be persuaded that the attempt was worth trying. The two went down to Folkestone and took lodgings; their landlady, according to the evidence, " was under the impression that they went every day to the pier, going down to enjoy the fresh air, and to amuse themselves much in the manner that persons at sea-bathing places usually do." In fact, they spent their time hanging round the Harbour station offices, watching the procedure of the arrival of the boat train and especially what happened to the safe keys. They got to know where the keys were kept, but several policemen had their eyes on them, and they returned to London.

Here a young man of Pierce's acquaintance, W. G. Tester, clerk in the South Eastern Railway traffic superintendent's office, told him that one of the safe keys had been lost on a boat and all the safes were to go to Chubb's for recombination of the locks, alteration of the tumblers, and new keys. Tester, who conducted the correspondence with Chubb's, managed to abstract the new keys for a time, and Agar made impressions from them. (He insisted on doing this himself.)

But this disposed of one lock only; there was also a No. 2 lock on each safe, and an impression of the key for that one had to be obtained. Agar's ingenuity was equal to the challenge. A box of bullion, worth about £200, was sent down to Folkestone to be called for by " C. E. Archer "—who was Agar. He called for the box and observed where the key of the safe was kept. A few weeks later, at the end of October, the pair went down to Dover and one day walked over to Folkestone, arriving at the Harbour Station just as the boat train was coming in. They waited until, in the bustle and confusion, both clerks were out of the office; then Pierce boldly walked in, unlocked the cupboard which contained the safe key, took it out, and brought it to Agar, who quickly took an impression and handed it back to Pierce. Pierce then walked into the office and replaced it in the cupboard. (It was ironical that Mr. Chubb afterwards testified that the No. 2 locks were so corroded that it was obvious they had not been used for years; so this piece of audacity appears to have been wasted.)

Making the keys from the impressions took some considerable time, but early in 1855 they were ready, and it became necessary to test them in the locks.

James Burgess, the guard, had been in the conspiracy for some months, and Agar travelled down in his van several times to try the keys in the locks. They did not fit at first, but after more work the false keys worked the locks. All that remained was to get some substance of approximately the same weight as the gold they proposed to abstract, so that the safes should pass the weighing tests which they knew were applied at Folkestone and on the French side. They bought 2 cwt. of lead shot—not all at once—at the Shot Tower, by Hungerford Bridge, and they put it into a number of bags made of check duster-cloth, which they bought at Shoolbred's in Tottenham Court Road.

They were not, however, free to choose their own day for the robbery, for they had to avoid the ordinary boat (or "tidal") train, which ran through to the Harbour Station at Folkestone. They decided to operate instead on the down Dover mail, leaving London Bridge at 8 p.m., on a day when bullion for Paris was carried by it on account of the tidal service having left too early. This was why the guards' rota had to be altered, to give Burgess the same duty for two months running.

Pierce and Agar went down prepared for the journey night after night for nearly a fortnight, until at last Burgess came out to give them the signal. The fourth man, Tester, called for the first part of the proceeds at Reigate, travelled back to London Bridge, and took the last train, at 10.20 p.m., down the Greenwich line; the others went on to Dover, as described above.

The evidence offered at the trial, which took place at the Old Bailey, on January 13-15, 1857, was remarkably complete: railway servants who could testify to seeing Pierce and Agar hanging about Folkestone Harbour; cab-drivers who took them about London; domestic servants; a hairdresser of Lambeth Walk who made a wig for Pierce; money-changers who bought the American "eagles"; and above all Fanny Kay, but for whom Pierce, Tester, and Burgess might never have been found out. Her evidence was followed with the greatest interest, especially her denial that she was "in the habit of" getting intoxicated. She smilingly agreed that she might—not more than once—while living at Shepherds Bush, have been taken home drunk in a wheelbarrow. The railway's solicitor, Mr. Rees, seems to have been something of a detective on his own, for while searching Pierce's house at Kilburn and looking for possible hiding places, he noticed a hole in the pantry; he concluded it was newly-dug, "for there were green leaves in the cinders, and the claw of a lobster, quite fresh."

Burgess and Tester, being servants of the railway at the time of the robbery, were sentenced to transportation for 14 years; on Pierce, who was not, the judge said he was "unfortunately compelled to inflict a less severe sentence," two years' hard labour; for "a greater villain than you are, I believe, does not exist." "This strong language," says the report, "was received by the audience with a loud burst of applause," the woes of Fanny Kay no doubt looming larger with them than those of the South Eastern Railway. For its part, the railway had some special bullion vans built, and shipments of gold ceased to be put into the guard's van.