

BAKER VERSUS THE FIRM

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VAN CLEVE, DENTON AND PETE

"Hello, Jim! How's business?" he cheerfully cried.

"Fairly brisk," I answered, at the same time thinking that no person but Baker would ever have the nerve to come in after what had transpired.

"I thought it must be," laughed he. "Got a new case, too, since I left, haven't you? I see Riley is on a shadow job now. Quite a come down for one of our best men, isn't it. You know Riley has been following me for two or three days. We've been having a lovely time, he and I. I felt just like a walk this morning, so I started off good and early. Riley came along like a nice little boy, and we had the loveliest walk imaginable. Of course Riley might tell you different. I noticed him once or twice over my shoulder and he seemed to be perspiring quite freely. By the way, isn't it a beast of a hot day? Why I am almost warm myself; and poor old Riley: he is so terribly fat! He must be making a noise like a pot of boiling water by now."

"Where is Riley now?" I asked, when I could get a chance to put in a couple of words.

"Why, he's outside waiting until I come out. I'm going to take him off somewhere and lose him when I go out, for it gets on my nerves to have a guardian all the time. I just dropped in, you know, to thank you for putting a protector over me. So very very kind of you, to be sure! Just tell Williams that Riley and I will have a lovely time this afternoon, and not to blame him to-morrow morning when he tells how he lost me. Good-bye, Jim. See you later." And off he went, smiling as ever, and apparently not in the least put out on account of Riley.

I told Williams about Baker's re-appearance later, and his remarks were far too lurid to be put in print.

However, Baker's visit had the effect of making us awaken to the fact that we would have to use more tact in future, and the following day, a new man, whom Baker had never met, was put on his track. We had strong hopes that this coup would be successful, and the man was told to use the strongest precaution to avoid becoming observed. He did, or at least he swore later that he did, but it was not long before Baker again paid us a visit.

Again I happened to be alone in the office.

"Oh, say, Jim," he gasped, as he beamed at me over the railing. "That new man you have following me is a regular dandy. Why, I didn't notice him yesterday until nearly ten o'clock. He sure is all to the good. You just hang on to him and when I come back in a few weeks I will make one of the best men you have got out of him. But tell him to try some other work for a start and not to follow me, for he will get himself disliked if he don't stop it, and you know I never like to fall out with the boys. Well, good-bye, Jim. Better luck next time! By the way, I was to a palmist's last night and she told me that my old firm was going to have an awful hard run of luck and that it was going to get worse and worse if I didn't go back. I told her that I could not think of it, and the poor old dame nearly cried. She said these failures were such terrible things and turned so many good men out of employment, and almost begged me to go back. Isn't it funny how true these people are sometimes, Jim?"

"Get out, you old croaker!" I shouted. "This firm isn't going to have any failure yet awhile, and when we want you we know were to get you."

"All right, Jim," he said. "You

know my old address. It will still catch me."

We did not see anything more of Baker for several days but we were continually kept in remembrance of him. Client after client called us up either over the phone or came into the office with an expression of disapproval on their faces, and almost invariably they would have some protest to make about the way in which we were handling some operation.

"What is the matter with you, anyway, Williams?" said one of the oldest clients we had, "Your men don't seem to be able to keep under cover at all of late. I can't get a decent piece of work out of you, nor have I been able to do so for some time. You will certainly have to do better or I will be compelled, much as I dislike to, to go back to our old friend Baker. You know, I suppose, that he is working for Holmes and Boyd now."

"No. I didn't know that," Williams said craftily, "How do you know?"

"Well," he replied, "I don't suppose I should tell, but a friend of mine wanted some work done in your line, and as he had always patronized Holmes and Boyd, he sent to them for a man. I happened to be in the office and in came no one else than Baker, and the same old Baker as of yore."

"When was this?" asked Williams. "Only yesterday," was the reply.

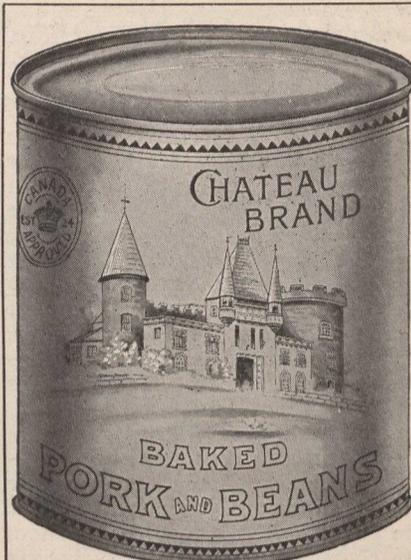
When we were again alone, Williams turned to me and said "Why didn't our man report that Baker was with Holmes and Boyd? What kind of a crowd have we got anyway?"

"I guess," I answered, "that our men did not know he was employed anywhere. They don't seem to be able to keep track of him at all lately. He comes out every morning and they do well if they keep track of him until noon. It is my candid opinion that he knows who is following him every day and simply gives them the slip whenever he wants to."

"And that is where he is getting his money to do all this devilment, I suppose," replied Williams. "Holmes and Boyd! Yes, I guess they would be willing to give him employment if he turns over all the business we lose to them. That firm would do anything underhand for the sake of doing us out of a client. I have been wondering lately where Baker was getting money enough to loaf around and tip off our men, and now that is explained, all right."

"Mr. Williams," I said, "Why don't you take him back? He has the upper hand, and although we may be able to catch him in time, we can't do so before we have lost half of our clients. Why we have lost over a dozen already and it is getting worse all the time. His yarn about the old palmist was certainly no dream. It's coming far too true. The clerks are having a fine time now with nothing to do, but they seem to be about all who are enjoying themselves in this office. I know it will be a bitter pill to swallow to take him back, but what's the use of bucking against a man like that. We haven't got his equal, and he knows nearly every one of the men. We might be able to get new men, but we can't run our business without men of experience. Come on, give in! Baker would never turn us down if we get him back, and I don't know but what he might be able to bring back some of the clients we have lost."

It was a wonder the Chief had listened this long. Without giving



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