

# A Story from Real Life

## The Great Train Robbery in Which Charles Stevenson "Made" \$75,000 and the Strange Part a Tornado Played in Restoring the Booty to Its Rightful Owner.



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**B**OARDING a swiftly moving train, creeping over the roofs of the cars until the end door of the mail car was reached, crashing in this door, overpowering the mail clerks, binding and gagging them, is a feat any yeggman would be proud to plead guilty to. That is what Charles Stevenson did. But after fleeing with the plunder, burying it and eluding capture for months, he forgot the location of the grave that held the little fortune. It lay mouldering in the earth for a period of seven or eight years until a tornado unearthed it and it was returned to its rightful owners, a trick of fate which would drive even the most stolid of yeggmen to the verge of suicide. This and other incidents almost as stirring have been crowded into the young but eventful life of a negro whom the police regard as one of the most remarkable criminals they ever had to deal with, yet, perhaps, he has served fewer years in prisons for his offences against the federal government than any yeggman who was ever caught blowing a safe.

Occupying a prominent place in government criminal records will be found the name of Charles Stevenson, alias Charles Savage, alias William Scott, alias "Tom" Kelly. Duly and chronologically inscribed are the post office robberies in which he was concerned, to say nothing of the number of mail pouches he stole from baggage trucks in railway stations. Strange to say, in every case these pouches contained registered mail. It also is noted that Stevenson is a negro, exceptionally well educated, surprisingly cleanly in his habits, and the personification of neatness when he appears in public. Other notations concerning his record emphasize the desperate character of the man—his penchant for firearms and his skill in handling them—and for the benefit of those inspectors who might be seeking him a warning is given to be always well prepared, "for he can shoot quicker than lightning and if you don't get him he will get you."

**A MURDERER AT HEART.** Inspectors who have had personal encounters with the negro have made these notations, while others were scribbled on the record by the wardens of prisons where Stevenson was incarcerated. All agree that he is a "clever thief, a smart crook, but an all round bad man and a murderer at heart."

Despite his good education and the laborious efforts of an old mother to instill in the son good principles, Charles Stevenson fell in with evil companions and seemingly all the benefit he derived from his early training was an aptitude to absorb knowledge of those things which the old mother had taught him to shun. From early boyhood the young negro was in front. His appearance was in his favor, for, born and reared in the Far West, where the prejudices against those of his race was nil, he was always able to procure good and remunerative jobs. Yet somehow these he never kept, for he invariably found himself in hot water, and when not openly accused of theft or some other crime equally flagrant the finger of suspicion pointed so accurately in his direction that he was discharged from the service of those who previously had been so kindly disposed toward him.

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learn the lay of the land before he attempted fresh operations, inasmuch as he was liberally supplied with funds following a number of rich hauls in the immediate past, fruits of which even his reckless disposition had not exhausted. In nearly all of Savage's jumps from city to city it was afterward learned he was invariably accompanied by a woman. That made it easy for him to procure staterooms aboard trains and bridal suites in those hotels where class distinction and the color line did not exist. The color line is not as sharply drawn in some localities as it is in the East, and this served the purposes of Savage and aided him materially.

**TWO GOOD HAULS.** Savage arrived in Portland the latter part of July and, withstanding temptation as long as he could, he finally yielded on the night of August 3, when he stole a mail pouch in the railway station. There were several hundred dollars in the pouch, and seemingly this did not satisfy the negro, for he repeated the trick a night or two later, this time getting a sum approximating \$2,500. For a time he disappeared, but a few weeks thereafter he returned to Portland and fell in with a thief by the name of Kelly Wiley, and for a time they went on a wild debauch.

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if he succeeded in extracting the pouch from the train. Just where Savage, or Stevenson, boarded the express train does not seem to be known, but he and his two accomplices stowed themselves away from the prying eyes of the train crew until the train reached a lonely spot about fifty miles east of Kansas City. The records are equally hazy as to how Savage and his two companions forced an entrance into the mail car, but into the Kansas City terminal the train pulled and the mail clerks were found writing and scribbling to free themselves from the thongs that imprisoned them. They could only tell that three men sprang seemingly from the sky upon them, bore them to the floor of the car, with hands pressed over their mouths before they could make an outcry or reach for their weapons. It was all over in a flash, and the train was running at such a high rate of speed that the mail clerks were positive it was impossible for any human beings to have survived a leap from the car at that time.

**THE BANDITS ESCAPE.** The supposition is that the three bandits forced an entry through the mail car and leaped upon the unsuspecting mail clerks as they were busy assorting their mail sacks preparatory to entering the terminal. After procuring the pouch containing all the registered mail they left the car by the same door, securing it after them to prevent possible pursuit. Then, climbing to the roof of the car, they rode on to a point where the train slowed up either at a signal tower or for the ascent of a steep grade and leaped off and made for the woods.

In the stolen pouch was \$50,000 in one lot intended for a Denver bank, just as Stevenson's New York informant had prophesied. Better still, this shipment consisted of five, ten and fifty dollar bills with a few hundred dollar bills included. This was especially lucky for the negro, as he knew he would have no difficulty in passing the money without arousing suspicion.

In the same pouch were upward of fifty other registered packages, and these contained sums ranging from \$100 to \$1,500 each. It was estimated at the time that the robbery had netted the bandits a sum approximating \$75,000 and, naturally, the government bestirred itself to find the thieves the moment the hold-up was reported upon the train's arrival at Kansas City.

**UNDER COVER.** Meanwhile Stevenson and his accomplices put as great a distance between themselves and the scene of the hold-up as possible. They dared not take to the railroad, for they knew that every passenger or tramp travelling over that road that night would be marked and made to give a good account of himself. Therefore their only safety lay in keeping to the woods and, furthermore, in the event of capture due care must be taken that no money should be found on them.

One of the smaller packages was ripped open and the cash taken from it was equally divided among the three. Stevenson agreed that he would "plant" or bury the major portion of the loot until such time as the hunt for the robbers had grown less eager, when they would meet at some designated rendezvous and return and "lift" the plunder and equally divide it.

After a lapse of several months the two men who participated in the robbery with Savage were captured. They confessed their part in the hold-up, but naturally shifted the blame for the whole affair to

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Wiley exercised such strong influence over Savage that he soon separated him from his ill-gotten hoard, and as soon as this was all spent he interested him in a new means of procuring easy money. This proved an error of judgment on Savage's part, although he managed to escape the cell in which he was incarcerated for a while.

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A jivvy salesman who frequently visited Portland had been marked by Wiley as one likely to yield a goodly sum were proper means taken to bring this about. Wiley knew all about the habits of this salesman, whose name was Lowenthal. He had frequently followed him while he was making his rounds from store to store, and he figured it out to a nicety that there were several lonely spots in his itinerary which would afford ample shelter in the event of a hold-up and which were ideally situated for a quick and safe "getaway." According to the various phases of them with the very same who were detailed to find the thief. On the night of July 13, 1901, a package containing several hundred dollars disappeared and on the following night another estimated to have contained about \$3,000 vanished. With it went Savage, for he then realized such a haul and cry would be raised that Post Office detectives from all parts of the West would be called into service, and in his mind he had long been seeking for other offences. Savage doubled on his tracks and went to Topeka, where he had no trouble in lifting an especially valuable pouch from a truck in the Union Station. The empty pouch, its contents cut and slashed and all of value missing, was found on the outskirts of the city near the railway tracks, where Savage had boarded a freight train for parts unknown.

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