

0. Tricky Vic and His Final Con - Story Preface

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One spring day in 1935—about two years after America had abolished Prohibition by passing the Twenty-First Amendment—Victor Lustig made a very bad mistake: He betrayed his girlfriend.

Angered because he'd been seeing another girl, she called the police to let them know where they could find her straying beau.

That call led to the end of Lustig's conning days. With the scar he bore on his left cheek, from a fight over a girl many years before, the "Count" was fairly easy for the police to identify.

Victor, however, still had at least one more trick up his sleeve—even after the police took him into custody.

Awaiting trial, which was scheduled for the 2nd of September in 1935, the "Count" was held in a third-floor cell at the Federal Detention Headquarters in New York. Showing officials that the facility was not as "escape-proof" as they thought, Lustig crafted a departure plan.

On the day before trial—still wearing his prison clothes—Victor used some bedsheets to make a rope. Lowering himself, to the street below, he pretended to be a window washer. Many people saw him in action but they, too, must have bought one of his last, best cons.

THE COUNT ESCAPES JAIL ON SHEET ROPE

International Crook Drops 50 Feet to Street in Sight of Hundreds on West Side.

BOASTED HE WOULD FLEE

Had \$51,000 in Counterfeit Bills When Arrested—Faced Trial Tomorrow.

Sept 2, 1935

Victor (The Count) Lustig, the dignified 45-year-old confidence man whose money-making schemes have kept the police of two continents busy for twenty-seven years, escaped from the Federal Detention Headquarters at 437 West Street shortly before 1 o'clock yesterday afternoon.

He made his exit in full view of perhaps a hundred persons via a rope of nine bedsheets knotted together, sliding fifty feet from a third-floor dormitory window into cobblestoned West Eleventh Street, in Greenwich Village.

The Count had been in the detention prison under \$50,000 bail since May 12, when secret service agents caught up with him at Seventy-fourth Street and Broadway, and with a key they said they found on him, opened a locker in the Times Square subway station that contained \$51,000 in counterfeit banknotes and the engraved plates from which they were made. He was to have been brought to trial tomorrow for possession of the notes.

Boasted He Would Escape.

THE COUNT FLEES JAIL ON SHEET ROPE

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is almost frightened the witness away, but he summoned up his courage.

"Mister," he said, "did you know that a man just escaped from the third floor?"

The wicket slammed shut, and a few moments later the swinging rope of sheets was hauled back into the jail. Detective Frank Campbell of the Charles Street police station responded to the call for police. He said later that the prisoner apparently had cut his way through a wire netting with a sharp instrument. The bed sheets, collected from nine of the forty beds in the dormitory, were fastened to a brace inside the window.

Beginning at 1:57 P. M. the following police alarm was broadcast at intervals over the police radio system, and over the teletype machines to the Eastern States, eventually to be relayed nationally:

"Code Signal 5 (which directs patrolmen to watch ferries, bridges and avenues of escape from the city).

"Escaped from the Federal Detention prison at Eleventh Street and West Street, N. Y. C., Robert V. Miller, alias Count Lustig, 45, 5 feet 7, 180 pounds, blond, partly bald, brown eyes, scar over right eye, was being held in \$50,000 bail for possession of counterfeit money. Wanted by the Sixth Squad."

Believe Auto Was Waiting.

The police advanced the theory that the escape was well planned, and that one of the count's friends had picked him up in an automobile on West Street. They said that the blue dungarees and slippers that constitute the prison garb would have brought about his capture by the first patrolman he met if he had tried to escape further afoot.

At the jail a voice told inquirers that the superintendent was away. Asked for information about the incident—how, for example, the Count had been able to collect nine sheets and knot them together, cut a hole in the mesh covering the window, and escape while he was supposed to be relaxing on the roof—the voice said, "I'm sorry."

Under so many aliases that the police have never been able to determine his real name, Lustig has ployed his trade all over Europe and the United States since 1908, serving short terms in Europe in the old days for petty swindles. Of the dozens of brushes with the police in the United States only one conviction appears on the imposing record sheet. That was in Oklahoma City in 1920, when he was fined \$19 and costs over a matter of morals. He has jumped bail in a half dozen instances, and has at least one previous jail break to his credit. In 1927, as Albert Gramman,



FLEES FEDERAL PRISON.

Victor (The Count) Lustig.

he sawed his way out of Lake County jail at Crown Point, Ind., the same jail that John Dillinger escaped from with a wooden pistol.

He started his career in Prague, under the name of Lustig, where in 1908 he served two months in jail for a petty theft. Up to 1922 he had served a half dozen terms in Austria and Switzerland. In 1927, as Robert Lamar, a "salesman," he was arrested in St. Louis for Denver authorities, and jumped his bail in Denver.

The next year Denver got him again, this time as Volster Lustig, and the crime was a confidence card game. He left town and his bond was again forfeited. Omaha had him for a swindle, but couldn't prove a case against him.

Through the Nineteen Twenties, as George Shabo, Victor Gross, Charles Gruber, Robert Dural, Charles Gromer, Albert Phillips and Albert Gramman, he saw the inside of detention cells from San Francisco and Los Angeles, via Chicago, Detroit, Indianapolis and Crown Point to New York.

Complainants charged he sold them money-making machines, interested them in card games or stock pools, and passed bad checks.

Swindled a Texas Sheriff.

The Count moved in the best circles, dressed in dignified clothes and talked with a clipped accent. His ploys won most victims over readily. He sold one of his money-making machines to a Texas Sheriff for \$125,000 in cash.

In 1929 he ran out of funds in Paris while he was in Europe buying choice vintages for the Jack (Legs) Diamond interests and got into difficulties with the French authorities that resulted in his expulsion from the country by governmental decree.

As Robert V. Miller he was arrested in New York for Newark authorities in 1930, but was released. In the next several years he was arrested for various swindles in South Eagle Pass, Texas, as J. E. Richards as G. H. Werner in Fort Worth and as Robert G. Wagner in Miami. In no case was there sufficient evidence to hold him.

He was reputed, although this was never substantiated, to have

been the count mentioned in the career of Jules W. (Tricky) Armstrong.

The counterfeiting equipment found in the Times Square locker in May was responsible for a flood of nearly perfect \$100, \$20, \$10 and \$5 bills throughout this country and Canada, according to the authorities.

This time, however, he did not remain free for long. He was caught, in Pittsburgh, nearly a month after his New York escape.

During the trial, Victor realized the evidence against him was overwhelming. He pled guilty to the charges from which he'd fled—a counterfeiting claim—and was sentenced to a fifteen-year term at Alcatraz. The Judge imposed an additional five-year sentence for Lustig's New York jail break.

Victor Lustig joined Al Capone as a prisoner at "The Rock." It was a place from which he could not escape.

The "Count" contracted pneumonia there, so he was transferred to the Medical Center for Federal Prisoners in Springfield, Missouri. He died, at that medical center, on March 11, 1947.

Tricky Vic's death certificate reportedly notes his real name—Robert V. Miller—and states that he'd worked as ... an "apprentice salesman."

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

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Media Stream



Federal Prison at Alcatraz Island

The federal prison at Alcatraz Island, near San Francisco, is also known as "The Rock." Some of America's most-notorious criminals served their time here. Among those prisoners was "Count Victor Lustig," whose birth name was Robert Miller. Tricky Vic died at Alcatraz on March 11, 1947.

Image of Alcatraz, online via Wikimedia Commons.

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Victor Lustig - Tricky Vic Goes Down

When his girlfriend told New York police where to find Count Victor Lustig, his con-man days were nearly over. Nearly ... but not quite.

This photo, taken in the spring of 1935, depicts Lustig going through the court process which would ultimately put one of the 20th-century's most notorious con men behind bars forever.

Image online via Wikimedia Commons.

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Victor Lustig and His Escape from Detention

A notorious con man, during the first part of the 20th century, Count Victor Lustig had scammed many people.

In the spring of 1935, however, he was caught by police in New York City.

The story of his arrest was big news, but the story of his escape—from federal custody—was just as big.

This image depicts a news article about his escape, from New York's Federal Detention Headquarters, in early September of 1935.

Article about Victory Lustig's arrest, online via Wikimedia Commons.

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