

The Reactor

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Of the preacher and his bilking brother

It was at a time when there was no such place as Linda Mar. Sharp Park was a tiny, remote place with a golf course. Herschel Harkins was Sharp Park's most respected citizen. He was the pastor of the Little Brown Church, the only church in town.

The worst thing I've ever heard said about Rev. Harkins: He wouldn't allow dancing in the church basement.

On the other hand, there was his brother Bill. While Rev. Harkins served God in a number of pastorates around the state, Bill was developing his own talents. He could copy signatures with precision. They couldn't be told from the originals. This got him in no end of trouble, which he attempted to avoid by escaping from various jails. Rev. Harkins, as a good Christian, did his best to help his brother, who often displayed repentance, even after escaping from Agnews State Mental Hospital.

While Bill was incarcerated at San Quentin the famous warden Clinton Duffy went to bat for him. Bill must have been a charming man.

If I first read about him in a book I found in the Pacifica Library 20 or more years ago. Not long after, the book was "weeded" from the collection.

Recently I thought of Bill again. I wasn't much help to the librarians. I'd forgotten his first name. I knew he had been a con man, but that was about it. With the little I gave them some librarians throughout the Peninsula Library

System did their best to find our forger. They came up with a number of Harkinses, none of them Bill. It wasn't for lack of trying. It is truly amazing what a thorough research job a good librarian can do when she (or he) sets her mind to it.

It turned out that the story of William H. Harkins was written for Argosy magazine and reprinted in a book called "The Double Dealers," edited by Alexander Klein. The chapter on Harkins was written by Charles Lanius. A Burns Detective Agency expert called Harkins "the greatest lone-wolf bank bilker the world ever produced."

Mr. Harkins didn't start his criminal career until he had been a bank clerk and served in the Army Air Corps in World War I. He never used violence, and he often won over his jailers. Even a tough cop was quoted as saying "such a pity. I guess Harkins is the nicest guy I ever had to jug."

He was still cheating bankers (and still winding up in jails) in his sixties. His intelligence, cleverness and skills at forgery were never in doubt.

Rev. Harkins attributed his brother's criminal actions to an injury suffered in World War I. It's possible. The good pastor never gave up on his brother. Over and over, he tried to help him, to straighten him out, to steer him along the right path.

Rev. Harkins lived frugally. Bill Harkins, when on the loose, was a free-wheeling spender.

He was called witty, companionable, a man who spent his money on horses and women as fast as he stole it. Charming though Bill may have been, I think I prefer Herschel.

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