

Clive Cussler The Heist

1

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When Woodrow Wilson entered the lavish dining room aboard the presidential yacht, *Mayflower*, the men seated around the conference table got to their feet and turned to him in silent reverence. The slender President was dressed in a fashionable mocha-colored lounge suit that seemed to add to his tall stature. He had a long, some said horsey, face, while his stance and expression were that of a stern schoolmaster. But when his lips parted, a velvety voice laced with humility and intelligence enraptured all within earshot.

"Gentlemen, please take a seat before a Potomac River crosscurrent forces the issue."

A ripple of laughter reverberated through the room as the men visibly relaxed and retook their seats with the President. A white-gloved steward closed the doors behind the chief executive while two Secret Service agents took up station just outside the room.

"Thank you all for joining me today," Wilson said as he settled at the head of the table. "The captain informed me that we will cast off shortly. We will head down river to our planned lunch at Mount Vernon, although I'm sure there are some in this town who would prefer that we keep on sailing, all the way to South America," he added, to a flourish of grins. "While this would be a prime opportunity for a few hands of poker and a good cigar among new friends, we do have a bit of business to conduct." He tilted his head a moment, then turned to the steward. "On second thought, there's no reason we can't enjoy a smoke and a drink in the process."

Wilson was relatively new to politics, having won the White House only two years after being elected the governor of New Jersey, but he'd been a college dean for many years prior and knew how to lead. And having garnered nearly fifty percent of the popular vote in a three-candidate race, he enjoyed a strong mandate to do so.

The twenty-eighth President of the United States was given a rosewood box of cigars and he handed it to the man on his left. As the cigars were passed around the room, the steward returned with a tray of shot glasses and a bottle of amber liquid with a label so old it was peeling away.

"This is our first meeting together and it must be one of celebration. This bottle of scotch was a congratulatory gift from H. H. Asquith, England's prime minister, upon my inauguration. I'm told it was aged in a barrel for fifty years and has been in this bottle another fifty."

Shots were poured and the room was soon wreathed in aromatic smoke. The consensus was the whiskey was the finest any had ever enjoyed. "I might just be compelled to run for reelection if Asquith will promise another bottle for a second inauguration," Wilson said to more laughter.

The meeting on the yacht was the culmination of years of work and careful negotiations across party lines and involving all three branches of the government. The President, knowing he had his audience, began his speech.

"If I were to claim the absolute brain trust of American banking was assembled before me today, there wouldn't be a dissenting voice in all the nation. Each of you have dozens of years of experience running some of our most successful banks and now each of you has agreed to head one of the twelve newly created Federal Reserve Banks and finally give the country the centralized monetary system it needs as we forge ahead."

"I need not tell this august group that the United States is growing or that the budding twentieth century will be our time to shine among the nations of the world. But in order for us to reach our fullest potential, we must come together in a more centralized fashion."

He was greeted by murmurs of agreement.

"We saw less than twenty-five years ago how the states and even individual counties set their own time standards. Efficient railroad scheduling was nigh impossible as a result, and fatal accidents occurred with regularity. It took all the railroad owners coming together to codify the system of regulated time zones we use today.

"That is but one example of how our nation's needs have outstripped our ability to meet them at a state or local level. The devastating bank runs we endure on a cyclical basis are another example of how America is falling behind the rest of the civilized world. The Panic of 1907 nearly ruined many of us and left countless businesses and individuals destroyed in its wake. I imagine each of you had at least one acquaintance or close friend end his life because of his ruination."

Heads nodded around the table.

"The individual states will maintain all of the rights laid out in our Constitution, but the federal government must take a stronger leadership role and that begins with a private, centralized banking system overseen by the board I have appointed."

The men in the room hung on Wilson's every word. All but one man. Peering out a side porthole in boredom, Isaac Bell, lead detective for the Van Dorn Agency, found few topics less appealing than banking.

"And this, gentlemen, shall be our new banner." Wilson opened a slim leather case he'd just been given by the man seated next to him and withdrew a neat stack of green paper cut in a rectangular shape about the size of an invitation envelope. In a somewhat theatrical display, he shoved the notes down the table so they fanned out enough for the men to get a couple for themselves. "This is the freshly minted Federal Reserve hundred-dollar bill."

Bell had been standing by the wall with some of the aides, and his disinterest vanished as he reached over an unknown banker's shoulder for one of the bills. He felt the motor yacht begin to pull away from the dock at the Washington Navy Yard and into the lazy current of the Anacostia River just north of where it joined the Potomac. Outside the bank of beveled glass windows and beyond the motor yacht's rail, the massive brick buildings of one of the nation's premier military shipyards slid past in silent majesty.

Bell turned his attention to the hundred-dollar bill, which represented an average worker's monthly pay, give or take. The bill was done in dark green ink and ornately styled. It took him a moment to recognize that the profile figure in the center of the note was none other than Benjamin Franklin, perhaps the cleverest and most forward thinking of the Founding Fathers. To the right of the portrait was a red fleurette surrounded by a Latin phrase Bell's schoolboy tutoring translated roughly as the "Seal of the

Treasury of North America." The back of the note was printed in a lighter green and showed five robed figures out of Greek or Roman mythology. The paper and ink had a curious texture unlike anything Bell had felt before. Very tactile, he thought.

A few of the bankers asked their neighbors if they understood the tableau on the back of the bill and Wilson read the room perfectly. "I'm told those characters are Labor, Commerce, Plenty, and Peace. The figure in the middle represents America. A little fancy for my taste, but what's a President's opinion really worth?"

Wilson got some chuckles. The man immediately to Wilson's right was William McAdoo, the secretary of the treasury, and as of earlier this year, the President's son-in-law. He was a tall, lean man with a face that resembled a beardless Abraham Lincoln. There had been some scandal, as he was twice Eleanor Wilson's age and a senior member of the administration, but it had now passed. McAdoo said, "I must ask for all the bills to be returned to me. Some notes have already shipped, but we're trying to keep the design a secret until they go into full circulation."

The mostly gray-bearded bankers passed the notes up the table for McAdoo to place back into the satchel.

Bell used sleight of hand to replace the note he'd examined with a similarly sized Manhattan Bank hundred-dollar bill that he sandwiched between two of the new bills being passed from hand to hand to the treasury secretary. He hid the new hundred in his wallet.

There was a reason for his mild thievery. He planned to distribute hand-drawn facsimiles of the new currency to all active Van Dorn agents. He wanted them as familiar as possible with the new notes because soon after their release, clever counterfeiters would no doubt try to pass fakes on to inexperienced bank tellers and store clerks. Bell anticipated a lucrative trade weeding out phony bills from the real ones until people were accustomed to the new currency.

He watched as the hidden Manhattan Bank note was passed up the table, and just as McAdoo was about to receive it, Bell faked a loud sneeze. The secretary looked up at the disturbance while his hand continued to slip the notes into his bag. He'd not seen the switch and Bell smiled to himself. This made him the first person to pull off a successful heist of the new Federal Reserve Bank. He made his way back to his spot leaning against a bulkhead.

As McAdoo sat down and placed the leather bag on the floor, a white-jacketed steward entered the dining room. Bell thought the aide was there to take the case away, but instead he stood nervously for a moment and then pulled McAdoo aside for a private word. Bell saw McAdoo's face turn pale as he glanced toward Wilson. He took a deep breath and approached the President, whispering something in his ear.

Wilson closed his eyes in a pained look that told of both long-suffering and resignation. He balled his hands into tight fists as if the gesture could hold his emotions in check. After a long pause, he turned and nodded to the steward and the man fled the room.

Wilson glanced around the table, making eye contact with most of the men assembled at his beckoning. "Gentlemen, I have to apologize," he said, his smooth voice turning hoarse. "In a few minutes we're going to divert to the Washington Arsenal, and I will disembark. I . . ." He hesitated, gauging how much he should share, and decided his distinguished company deserved the truth. "Most of you are unaware that my wife is gravely ill. It's her kidneys and there's nothing the doctors can do. When I left for the Navy Yard a short time ago, she was in good spirits and feeling reasonably well. Her attending physician sent a radio telegram just now. She's taken a sudden turn and he requests . . ." Wilson fought through the last few words. ". . . that I be at her bedside."

Bell locked eyes with his father, Ebenezer, who sat at the far end of the table across the room. The senior Bell would head the Reserve Bank of Boston, where the family had been successful lenders for generations. Although it had been years since Isaac's mother had passed away, he and Ebenezer felt the anguish in the President's final sentence as if they had only just left her graveside.

The yacht heeled to starboard as it changed course for the unscheduled stop and increased speed to get the President on his way back to his wife as soon as possible.

Wilson regained his composure quickly enough. As the First Lady had been ill for some time, he had to have grown accustomed, though never desensitized, to grief. He said, "Since you've come from all corners of the country to be here, there is no point to canceling this opportunity to talk. Secretary McAdoo will act as host in my stead, and to be perfectly frank, he speaks your language far better than I do. I only pray I'll understand his report on your discussion's progress."

He strode quickly from the room and vanished down the hallway beyond the glass doors, his armed guards in tow. Though the engines continued to drive the ship, and water sluiced along her hull in a steady whisper, the men in the dining room would maintain a full minute of silence following the President's sad news and abrupt departure.

Secretary McAdoo eventually got to his feet and unnecessarily straightened his tie. He paused, cleared his throat, and finally said, "I know that came as an unwelcome surprise, but my mother-in-law insists her illness be a private, family-only matter. As you can imagine, the President is deeply worried about her well-being, and yet remains fully committed to the launch of the Federal Reserve Bank. He understands that this is an historic moment, and he doesn't want it to slip through our fingers. So, let's refrain a few minutes while President Wilson steps off at the armory, and then we will get down to brass tacks."

While they waited for the luxury yacht to maneuver close to the dock at the Washington Arsenal, the chief steward and an assistant poured fresh coffee from silver carafes and set down plates heaped with pastries dripping with sweet icing or honey.

A few polite conversations were started. Each man at the table owned or ran a successful bank in their district, but because of how the Board was organized none were in competition with any of the others. Bell imagined the banker from Minneapolis, James Rich, according to the placard in front of his plate, had never heard of, or much less met, the man next to him, Atlanta banker Weldon Burdett.

Bell's father had confided in him on the train ride down to D.C. that the choice of Atlanta as home to a Federal Reserve Bank had been quite surprising to many of the others. It was well understood that the most important city in the Deep South in terms of its economy was New Orleans and yet Atlanta had been chosen. There had been some mild grumbling that both President Wilson and his treasury secretary had deep Georgia roots and a little favoritism had been in play.

The Mayflower came to a brief stop in the shadow of one of the many buildings along the shore of the armory and pulled away again, backing down the Washington Channel with the current out of the Tidal Basin before turning around near Greenleaf Point. Behind them was Long Bridge, which connected Washington to Alexandria, Virginia. The beat of the engine changed as steam built in the boilers and the sleek craft began picking up speed southward for Mount Vernon.

The conversation around the table soon intensified as each man put forth their vision of how the Federal Reserve should work. The basic framework had been dictated by an act of Congress, but there were many details to work out.

