

"CLUTCH" DONOHUE, BORDER ROBINHOOD, HAD TWO-SIDED CAREER IN FORT ERIE OF THE '90's

Famous as Express, Postal and Bank Robber, He Was Friend of the Unfortunate and Ill

(By Squire Soames)

We all, or most of us at least, have read about that middle-age character in Scott's book, "Ivanhoe," but how many of us know that forty years ago there was located right on this prolific Niagara frontier another Robinhood?

Old Squire Soames, in his search for local color for his stilt in this issue, has been hearing quite considerable about this Robinhood, whose real name we are told was "Clutch" Donohue. The appendum "Clutch" would appear to be quite appropriate, as both Robinhoods, the fabled and real one, first had to "clutch" ere they could dispense.

"Clutch" Donohue, however, was a real flesh and blood character who flourished in the Fort Erie of the '90's. He is supposed to have engineered a number of robberies over in the United States and lived right where the Queen's Hotel Apartments are located today on Niagara Street.

EXPRESS ROBBER DE LUXE

He was a robber of express shipments of a highly accomplished turn. One of his robberies is said to have netted him \$40,000, which he hid near Binghamton, N.Y., in a glass jar; that is the funds, of course, along with a quantity of jewelry taken at the same time. For this robbery he was arrested, but nothing could ever be proven against him, and it was only his admission in later years that really brought to light where the money had been hidden at the time. Donohue was mixed up in numerous bank robberies over the line also, and did not devote his efforts to Canada until late in his career. This proved to be his undoing, which we will shortly relate. Many of the unfortunate people of Fort Erie were patrons of his charity. In those days a good many of the poorer classes found articles of clothing, such as "reefers," sweaters, suits, shoes, etc., for themselves and children left at their homes by Donohue, who, strange to relate, was an exemplary citizen insofar as Fort Erie was concerned.

CREDIT WAS A-1

Donohue at times, of course, was out-of-funds, but his credit was sterling. No Fort Erie merchant ever cast doubt on the word of "Clutch," and it is recorded that the moment he came into funds he paid up his bills quickly. His charity extended to many angles, it being recorded that he aided one lad to obtain an education; another girl, whose health was failing, was sent to the South, where the gentle zephyrs of that climate eventually cured her of a bad lung condition. He was an able scholar in a good many ways, and took an active interest in the school system of the old Bertie district at the time, as well as in his native village of Fort Erie. At the same time, we are told Donohue was not a hypocrite, making no claims to be anybody in particular—never admitting actually any of his thefts, nor taking the trouble either—to deny his part in many of the escapades with which he was credited in participating.

His eventual participation in a postoffice theft at Peterboro, however, proved his undoing. Three thousand dollars was stolen in this affair, and for once the adroit "Clutch" could not prove any alibis, and he was sent down for a long prison stretch. He served a number of years in an Ontario prison, but was released when his health became shattered, and he is today buried not many miles away from the spot where this is being written—a mantle of green-sword covering what is left of his earthly foibles.

The moralist, who would point out that a career of crime can only be successful for a time, and that a foundation of evil is bound to fall through its own weakness, could find an interesting simile in the career of "Clutch" Donohue, but on the other hand his many genuine acts of charity, his respect for his home-town village, and his many gentlemanly acts, carry him far out of the drab drossness of the average common thief.

We are told that Donohue would disappear for long intervals from his haunts in Fort Erie, turning up at the end of a few months, flush and prosperous, with nary a word about the details of his absence. Whatever few bills he owed or had guaranteed would be paid in true gentlemanly style, and he would then proceed to settle down the life of a squire for a considerable period.

