

## *Bogus Detectives and Would-Be Detectives* by Allan Pinkerton

IN my upward of a quarter of a century's detective career many strange circumstances have continually arisen, and are constantly arising, to make the experience of my everyday life both remarkably painful and pleasantly romantic. The position which I occupy gives me an unusual opportunity to see life from the under side, and the worst as well as the best phases of human character are forced upon my notice, until they become, by second nature, a matter for study.

Among the peculiar experiences which are forced upon me are some from a class which have risen directly from the worldwide reputation which has been secured for my agencies and my methods of detection. Many unthinking people have come to believe that there is something mysterious, wonderful, and awful about the detective. All my life, and in every manner in my power, I have endeavored to break down this popular superstition, but it would seem that it could not be done.

Many persons seem to desire to believe that a detective holds some supernatural power, or yet is possessed of some finer instinct or keener perception than other mortals; and hence the bogus detective has the elements of success as a swindler when he even makes the shabbiest pretense of being a detective.

This foolish fancy as to the power of the detective comes, I am aware, from that element, nearly akin to fear in all of us, for anything mysterious or unexplainable. But I have always contended that the criminal could not best be brought to justice *by* the criminal, but by the clean, healthy, honest mind, using clean, healthy, honest methods, and those persistently and unceasingly.

It is undoubtedly true that the successful detective must be possessed of faculties fitting him for his peculiar character of work, and ten thousand men may possess those who live and die without the slightest hint of such capabilities. Into nearly every prominent profession or vocation men drift because they are by nature best suited to fit them. The successful merchant becomes so not, as a rule, through good fortune, but by keeping his work well in hand, being capable of managing a large number of employees, making his investments safe and certain, and being content with *gradually* acquired credit and wealth. But he *must* have the disposition and the ability to do all this, or he is quite likely to fail. And so with every other profession or business; and the detective must possess certain qualifications of prudence, secrecy, inventiveness, persistency, personal courage, and, above all other things, honesty; while he must add to these the same quality of reaching out and becoming possessed of that almost boundless information which will permit of the immediate and effective application of his detective talent in whatever degree that may be possessed.

And this is all there is to the very best of detectives.

If there is mystery attached to his movements, it is simply because secrecy is imperative, and that will never consist in vague hints and meaningless intimations. These are the surest signs that he is an impostor. If he *is* a detective, and an able one, he will not go about publishing the fact. Any

thinking person can readily see how utterly useless would be the efforts of such a person to accomplish anything worthy.

I have been led to say this much, not only to dispel the popular idea concerning detectives, but to also call the attention of my readers, and the public generally, to the almost countless instances where business men and private citizens are imposed upon and subjected to every manner of indignity and annoyance by the veriest swindlers extant, who pursue petty thievery or petty blackmailing schemes through the pretense of being detectives, and particularly of being “Pinkerton’s detectives.”

One of these scamps will call at some little provincial town, where communication with large cities is poor, and, after getting “the lay of the land,” will call upon some business man of the place—the more ignorant the better—and vaguely intimate that he is there in his interest. If the person should fail to understand, the bogus detective will buttonhole him, take him into a quiet corner, when the following conversation is likely to ensue:

“Pinkerton, you know?”

“Pinkerton? Pinkerton? Well, what about him?”

“I’m one of his men!” the alleged will reply, with an air of great importance.

“Well, I’ve heard of Mr. Pinkerton often; but what may your business be?”

“That’s just what concerns you!”

Here the assumed detective will probably show some forged letters or some cheap star, or something of the kind, with a pretense that it is his “authority” for acting in the business.

By this time the country merchant is half-frightened, wholly curious, and altogether mystified, and, very naturally, wishes to know what the nature of the man’s business is, and what is about to happen.

Upon this the bogus detective branches forth into a talk about Mr. Pinkerton having discovered that on such and such a night his store is to be broken into and robbed, and that he has been sent there to inform the merchant of the proposed burglary, and to act with him in preventing the same.

Now, nothing will more work upon a man’s fears than the conviction of impending danger—some evil which still lies in the dark, but which seems certain to transpire; and so soon as the bogus detective has laid this foundation, nothing is easier than for him to get upon the most confidential terms with his unsuspecting victim.

In the meantime the impostor has taken board at the best hotel in the place—if he has had assurance enough for that—and soon lets his pretended business be known in certain quarters,

though always exhorting the strictest secrecy, and he soon has the reputation about town of being “one of Pinkerton’s men!”

He will now probably begin operations by making a pretense of communicating with me, and, in the presence of some party whom he is desirous to impress with his importance, will seal and direct a massive “report” or letter to me, which, however, he is very careful not to mail. He will then hint at mysterious comrades—all my men—who are close at hand, but under cover, and who will be ready to assist him at the necessary moment, and that he proposes to make a clean job of the thing, and forever rid *that* place of robbers and criminals.

In this manner, and in various other ways, he gradually worms himself into public confidence. And this class of a fraud has sometimes even the audacity to telegraph me, in meaningless jargon, unintelligible combinations of words or sets of figures, until everything is ripe; and then, on the strength of my reputation as a business man and a detective, strikes right and left for money or any other thing he can get, and leaves the place between two days, having beaten everybody possible.

Others of this class will accidentally ascertain some foible, or possibly criminal act, of the private citizen, and will at once make known his object to be the arrest of the party on a certain charge—also quietly hinting that he is sorry for the publicity which must ensue, but that he feels compelled to do his whole duty. Perhaps he will inform the victim that he may be allowed his liberty for a day or two, in order to arrange his business affairs, and, in the interim, pretend to keep a close watch upon him. By this time the party is in a proper condition to be bled, and shortly is so worked upon that a snug sum is got, when the villain immediately decamps.

This pretending to be in my employ is a favorite dodge of impecunious wanderers and “dead-beats” who find themselves stranded at hotels. I have a large personal acquaintance among hotel-keepers and other public business men, so that, in my kind of business, circumstances might occur, as they have frequently occurred, where courtesies and favors from them have been of great benefit. The dead-beat has found this of use, and, with his keen insight into possible chances of extending his stay, or of getting away without the detention of his baggage, should he have any, he has frequently made such liberal use of my name as to permit his peaceful departure.

Even in communities where citizens are usually well informed, and perhaps I had recently brought some important case to a successful termination, some unprincipled lawyer or official, possessing a petty spite or grudge against a neighbor, has dimly hinted that he and myself understood each other; that when the proper time came he would cause an explosion, and that Pinkerton’s men were then in town, and keeping their eyes open too!

Slouching individuals of all manner of kind, traveling to or stopping at all manner of places, when the last resort has failed for raising the wind, or carrying out some miserable scheme, immediately transform themselves into pseudo-detectives, and nearly as often make a pretense of some near or remote connection with my business for as many various purposes as there are different swindlers.

But a short time since a mysterious individual appeared at the residence of a wealthy family of Iowa farmers, who are immediate relatives of a gentleman prominently connected with the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. He exhibited a letter purporting to be from my office, authorizing him to follow and hunt down certain Missouri outlaws, and also called their attention to an item from a Chicago paper relating an affray between one of my operatives and a criminal whom he was arresting, where the operative lost his finger from a pistol-shot. The name of the detective was given, and it corresponded with that of the bogus letter; while, sure enough, the impostor had lost just that finger spoken of.

The vagabond intimated that he wished to remain with them for a short time for his “detective” purposes, and also stated—which secured his admission to the family—that while he was there he would quietly keep his eye upon the members of a neighboring family with whom the former had been at feud for nearly fifteen years.

The actions of the man were incomprehensible. He was of course mysterious, and made a pretense of being out much of nights, and keeping very closely within the house during the day. He told great tales of miraculous doings with criminals, exhibited many wounds he had received in the assumed pursuit of his duty, and in various other ways played the role of a detective according to the stage rendering and the popular conception of that character, remaining with the family several weeks. But at last the real character of the man became known.

A brother of the farmer was a wealthy stock-man, and, after his trips to Chicago, always returned to the farm for a few days’ visit, generally with a considerable amount of money in his possession. On his first arrival there after the appearance of the bogus detective, the latter conceived a cock-and-bull story about having discovered a counterfeiter’s cave in the woods near the farm, which was occupied during the day, but always deserted at night, and he endeavored to induce the stock-dealer to accompany him on a tour of inspection. At first he consented to go; but his suspicions finally became aroused, and he refused unless also accompanied by his brother. This the scamp opposed, offering some excuse, which further inclined the people to believe he was an impostor. The same night the rogue suddenly left, and the parties found that every pistol or revolver in the house had been so tampered with that its effective use would be simply impossible.

It had been this particular bogus detective’s plan to get into the good graces of the family until such a time as the drover appeared, and then decoy him into the woods at night, where he might rob him or murder and rob him at leisure.

Not succeeding in this, and finding that the locality was becoming too warm for him, he decamped. The same night he robbed the post-office in the village near at hand, and was captured. He got one year in the penitentiary for this. But, strange as it may seem, I was never informed of his pretensions concerning being in my employ until after he had served his term and been discharged, when, evidently out of mere curiosity, the gentle man referred to as prominently connected with the *Philadelphia Inquirer* gave me a history of the matter and desired information as to the man’s genuineness.

I could give the reader hundreds of similar instances where people are daily permitting themselves to be imposed upon by these shrewd tramps and petty swindlers who, under the guise of “Pinkerton’s detectives,” carry on their villainous schemes of blackmail, and exasperating, although paltry swindles. I am continually receiving telegrams and letters asking if such and such persons are in my employ; whether they have been authorized to take certain proceedings, or whether I will be responsible for any indebtedness they may incur. And I am certain that a modest estimate of the sum I have expended in running down these pests and assisting in bringing them to justice would not fall short of ten thousand dollars.

But if “bogus detectives” have proven of constant annoyance and occasional absorbing interest, there is an other class of persons that have been still more persistent in endeavoring to attract my attention, and at all times a source of infinite amusement.

My mails are daily burdened with their communications. I am run down and cornered most ingeniously. I never have peace from their obstinate endeavors.

These are the would-be detectives.

They are legion.

They exist in all parts of the world, are in all sorts of positions or conditions of impecuniosity, and have every manner of ability imaginable. They *will* be detectives whether or no; and, if I do not give them a chance, they threaten to distinguish themselves on their own account. Every time word comes to the public of my agencies having succeeded in an operation of any magnitude these applications come in shoals, although the daily receipt is so large in number that the Government at least must be greatly benefited. I try to have them all suitably answered; but many of them defy a sober consideration and even a translation. These are turned over to Chief Clerk Robertson, and consigned to what I have appropriately named the “Lunatic File;” and I am sorry to confess that this is a wonderfully large monument to detective aspiration.

There seem to be three things which are the ambition of a very great class of men and women who have arrived at a point where they are desperately in need of employment. They wish to go upon the stage, become an author, or turn detective; and it is about an equal chance which way they go.

One of these people writes me:

“I am traveling around a great deal, and want you to send me a roving commission as one of your detectives. I see many instances where the power of such authority would be of great benefit to me.”

Now, here was an individual who really and honestly believed that I in some way had the power to grant him a “roving commission” to make an ass of himself on any occasion which might offer; and if there was one thing in the world that the precious scamp was sincere about, it was that I would go into ecstasies over being able to secure just such talent as his.

A benighted female writes from Detroit that she is “alone in the world;” that she is certain of being “born a detective;” that she is at present at boarding at a certain respectable boarding-house, where there is a thin partition separating her room from another, in which she is sure a noted gang of burglars have their rendezvous; that in the silent and witching hours of the night these men talk over the situation in deep and solemn voices, and arrange future plans for depredation and robbery; and that her ear is constantly applied to this partition, until she has become a sort of an Edison phonograph—in fact, a repository of wonderful secrets, which she will divulge—like the machine, give forth when she is unwound; and that all that is necessary for me to become possessed of such information as will enable me to distinguish myself and win fame, is to send her forty dollars. Think of it! only forty dollars! This will enable her to liquidate a slight outstanding indebtedness at the aforesaid boarding-house with a thin partition, when she will proceed to the ends of the earth, if necessary, and dog the footsteps of this band of robbers, and, by getting into rooms at hotels, and otherwise, will continue the phonographic business indefinitely.

Now, here was a genius that ought to have received encouragement; but unfortunately she did not set a sufficiently high value upon her services.

A gentleman, addressing me from the Grand Hotel, San Francisco, relates that he is writing a book from observation on the Pacific coast, and that he thinks a commission from me, authorizing him as a detective in that section, would prove of great benefit to him. In return for this he solemnly promises to give me and my business a “splendid puff” in his book, which he is sure (what author was ever not) will “sell like hot cakes.”

I felt a sympathy for the man, but was compelled to decline becoming responsible for his hotel and other bills, even at the risk of losing so excellent an opportunity for a place in his swiftly-selling book.

A party from a large town in Kentucky, who is in the piano and organ trade, writes that his income is becoming small, through the cutting on prices of base interlopers, and that, as his business is fast going to the devil, he has made up his mind to fling himself, as it were, body and soul, into the detective business; and, while certain that his services are worth to any employer or corporation from four to five thousand dollars a year, he will sacrifice himself to the cause of justice at a mere pittance. He concludes his interesting application with this *naive* and spicy remark:

“As I am a married man, with six cherubs, my mother-in-law being a permanent fixture with me now, I can leave home indefinitely.”

It might have been that here was the secret of a man, worth four or five thousand dollars to any employer, being willing to leave home indefinitely for a mere pittance.

Mothers-in-law have been the cause of even greater instances of desperation than this.

Away up from the cotton-fields of Texas I receive an application from a party who says he is with me every day and hour in my fight against criminals and law-breaking. He says he is

“nothing but a common cotton-picker,” but confesses that he has a great mind, and that to a massive intellect “cotton-picking has its drawbacks.” He bids me God-speed in my good work, and remarks that he knows a thing or two that I am not “up to,” even if I did come from Scotland, closing his letter with the proposition that, whenever I want a man who can get right at the bottom of things, he will leave the fair fields of Texas at a moment’s notice.

Poor fellow! I could almost see a man who had had better fortune in the years before, and who had written me more as an outburst of his own desperation at his cotton-picking fate in the burning sun of Texas, than because he had the remotest idea that he could be of any service to me or that I could more than kindly reply to him.

Another person, writing from a southern Illinois town, puts the matter in this concise manner:

“There is a band of burglars here. I’m going to hunt them out, if *you* can’t. I’ll come to Chicago for fifteen dollars a week, twenty dollars advanced.”

In the man’s efforts to appear wise and terse, he neglected to sign his name, and so I could not forward him the amount required.

Another would-be detective, with an inventive turn, writes me:

“I have a sure method of detecting crime or persons. I will disclose the same to you for two thousand dollars in money, or I will accept a position under you in your force, at a salary commensurate with the importance of my discovery, and use the system in connection with my operations.”

Out of mere curiosity I looked into this matter, and found the applicant to be an impecunious half-crazy “mind reader” and spiritualist.

A party from Pittsburg explained some of his abilities as follows:

“In the character of a common laborer or Irishman I can handle a pick and shovel admirably. As a negro I can transform my appearance and dialect, so that I could pass undetected among negroes themselves. I can pass in the best society as a titled foreigner, or play ‘coachy’ in a gentleman’s household. I can take any character to perfection, and, if you will indicate anything you wish assumed, I will put up a forfeit of any reasonable amount that I can assume it, or enact it so as to even deceive yourself. Salary is no object.

“I know I would love the detective’s life; and if you don’t want me, I shall go it alone.”

Never having made a bet in my life, I could not conscientiously take this wager, and therefore was compelled to inform the Pittsburg aspirant for detective honors that he would have to go it alone.”

The district attorney of one of the wealthiest counties in Wisconsin recently wrote me, asking to become a detective. He stated that he had a lucrative practice; had been very successful in his

office; could give the highest commendations from lawyers, members of the Wisconsin Legislature, senators, and from the press; but that he had become fascinated with his idea of the life of a detective, and that he felt that he must enter my service. He agreed to leave his business entirely, devote himself honestly and earnestly to the work, and prove himself in every way worthy of my best respect and esteem.

Now, here was an application worthy of all consideration; but I saw that the man was simply momentarily flushed with the supposed romance of the work, had never considered the numberless instances of ill-success and hard, grinding labor; in fact, that he had had—as a person will witness a grand theatric performance and become momentarily “stage-struck”—his mind fixed upon some brilliant achievement of the detective order, and was for the time being actually “detective-struck,” if that term is admissible. And I frankly told him so, showing him that his course did not lie in that direction. The result was: second, sober thought; and the man today thanks me for an honorable standing among the legal fraternity of Wisconsin.

Now, these are but a few samples, at random, out of thousands of applications from would-be detectives the country over. They are before me, as I write, in huge piles; from women who have a mission; from men who want a commission; from traveling preachers, who confess that there is much roguery even among church people which they wish to bring to light—always providing they can make a few dollars out of the business; from country bumpkins, who are dissatisfied with the plain ways of the village or the farm, and who imagine there is great glory and perennial romance in the detective’s career; from all sorts of men, who imagine they have a scent of all sorts of crime, and who only want my indorsement and a little, just a little, money to make the thing a grand success; from authors, who wish to become familiar with crime, in order to depict it, and who absolutely need, so they say, a connection with my agencies to accomplish it; from sailors, who promise to climb to the cross-yards, stand on their heads, and do other daring nautical feats while scattering circulars to advertise my business from wandering pedlars; from strolling tinkers; from traveling clock-repairers; from gypsies, and even from thieves in countless numbers!

Each one and all have abilities—on paper—that are simply marvelous. Each and all show me what a sacrifice they are making to take upon themselves such a life, and how brilliantly successful they will be in my service. And each and all want money, immediately and continuously.

Now, I have just this advice to offer to all with detective aspirations: Let well enough alone. If you are in any employment, remain in it; attend to it faithfully and honestly. You *might* become a detective; but where one becomes a successful detective, a thousand fail utterly and completely—or, worse, become blackmailers and vagabonds, if not actual thieves and criminals.

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