

*Quick Work*  
by Allan Pinkerton

“BANG, bang, bang!”

There was no response to this impatient knocking upon the heavy door of the small Adams Express Company building near the end of the Columbus, Ohio, Union Depot, that night.

There stood the train with all its usual bustle about it, the engine snorting like a spirited steed impatient to be out upon the road again, but the Adams Express clerk and assistant had not made their accustomed appearance. The express messenger, John Gossman, had become greatly alarmed, for but a few moments more elapsed before the train would pass on, and it was one of his guards who had been sent to awaken the two careless employees and hasten their regular visit to the train.

“Bang, bang, bang!” This time louder and more persistent than before upon the heavy oaken and riveted door. But there was still no answer from within.

Then the guard took hold of the door-knob, and, throwing his whole weight against the door, shook and rattled it frantically. Still no answer, and the guard rushed back to the train.

“Can’t wake ’em up, John. Mebby they ain’t there at all!”

Not daring to leave his car, the messenger, now fearing that foul play of some kind had transpired, directed the guard to return to the express building and get into it if he had to break in. In a moment more he was at the door, and, turning the knob, as he ordinarily would have done, the door swung readily upon its hinges, and he walked into the room.

It was very dark inside, and striking a match, he went to the gas-light, where he found that it had been turned very low. Letting on the full light, it was seen that the papers and packages lay about the floor in the wildest confusion, while the clerk and his assistant, who were lying in bed but a few feet from the safes, seemed to be in a sort of stupor; for, although the guard had halloed lustily to them after entering, he was obliged to give them a pretty thorough shaking.

It was evident that the two men had been chloroformed—the sickening, deathly aroma of that drug still pervading the atmosphere of the room—and that the company had been robbed. The agent of the company at Columbus, although it was about two o’clock in the morning, immediately informed the officers of the company of the affair, who called upon me, by telegraph, for help, and I was able to put Superintendent Warner, of my Chicago office, upon the ground during the next forenoon after the robbery, with two shrewd operatives in the background ready for any possible emergency which might arise in the case.

But little information had been forwarded with the brief telegram, but I was familiar with the working of the express company’s matters at Columbus, and I could hardly imagine how any thief or thieves could approach this building in so public a place, chloroform the inmates, and rob the safes, without attracting notice.

The main office of the company was located in the more business portion of the city, a considerable distance from the depot, and it had been for a long time necessary to keep a clerk and assistant at the depot to deliver and receive express matter, and the custom was for the clerk to leave the down-town office at about six o'clock in the evening, proceed to the depot, put everything snugly away in the safes, and then retire until the arrival of the late night trains, being awakened to attend to his duties, by the depot watchman; and I could not shake off the feelings which I impressed upon Mr. Warner before he took his departure, that this robbery could hardly have been committed without the complicity of some one of the express employees at Columbus.

A searching investigation by my superintendent developed the following facts:

On the evening before the robbery, May 16, 1871, John Barker, the depot express clerk, left the main office on Broad Street for the depot office at six o'clock, with seventy-two thousand dollars for different points, thirty-two thousand of which was in revenue stamps, and all of which was put into the safes. On the arrival of the late train at twenty-five minutes past two in the morning, the clerk did not make his appearance, although he had been called as usual by the watchman who was not certain that he had been answered, but who supposed Barker had been awakened. The guard had found the door open, as previously explained, and on gaining an entrance, and turning on the light, the keys had been found in one of the safe doors; everything seemed to be in confusion in the office; and Barker and his assistant were still in their bed, apparently stupefied from the effects of chloroform. A bottle still containing a small amount of chloroform was discovered, as also a sponge used in applying it to the faces of the sleeping employees. When they had finally been awakened, Barker was the first to speak, and he remarked: "Why, we've been robbed!" and, after noticing the package of revenue stamps, "I'm glad they left that much!"

Both Barker and his assistant acted in an honest, straightforward manner, and readily answered all questions put to them. A casual investigation would hardly have developed anything save that the office was entered, the men chloroformed, and the safes robbed; but a thorough examination did show, among other things, that the bolt on the door had been bent back, as if the door had been forced open. Unfortunately for this theory, however, the bolt, which ran from the frame across the edge of the door, had been bent considerably further than necessary, to permit the edge of the door to pass it, while there was no evidence of a "jimmy" or other instrument having been used to force the door open and thus bend the bolt. It had been done from the inside; and the very important query was: Who did it?

This trifling circumstance, which an amateur detective would be likely to wholly overlook, clinched the conviction in both my own and Mr. Warner's mind, that one of the two employees in the little office, or possibly both, had some criminal knowledge of the robbery, if, indeed, they had not done the work themselves.

While the investigation was progressing the two men were kept under constant espionage, and it was very soon discovered and communicated to me by Mr. Warner that John Barker, the express clerk, had a brother named Henry Barker, who had been seen at Columbus, and in a way to indicate that he had made every possible effort to prevent being seen in the city. It was also learned that this mysterious brother was from Chicago. These two facts ascertained, I soon

learned, in Chicago, that Henry Barker had borne a rather unpleasant reputation, and had been discharged from the employ of the Adams Express Company, as also from service on the Chicago and Alton Railroad. This might not amount to much, but taken in connection with other circumstances, it looked suspicious.

I was also informed by Mr. Warner that the express clerk, when questioned about his brother, at first denied all knowledge of him; but after a time he confessed that his brother had been in Columbus, but was there merely on a little friendly visit! He also laid great stress on the fact that his brother was wealthy, or rather that he had married a wealthy Chicago lady, and had no need to work. Following this out, I found that, instead of the wife of Henry Barker being a respectable and wealthy Chicago lady, she was neither. She proved to be merely the daughter of a noted proprietress of a Chicago house of ill-fame, who had given her the choice of marrying Barker, or being sent to the Reform School in that city; and that she was then living a disreputable life in mean apartments, and without a dollar of honestly acquired money on earth.

I judged that all these facts warranted the conclusion that the brothers were guilty of the robbery, or at least, had planned it, and had largely participated in the proceeds of the same. I accordingly intrusted Mr. Warner to at once cause the arrest of the express clerk, and use every effort to wring from him a confession, while his assistant and brother should be remorselessly watched and followed, hoping that they might in this way betray some evidence of guilt which would give me the truth of the whole matter.

It is a principle in criminal matters, which almost invariably holds true, that successful detection of crime is in nearly every instance defeated when all suspected parties are at once incarcerated. Let one or two, as the case may be, be held so closely that they cannot be approached or communicated with, and their accomplices will then, if they are watched by keen detectives, always make some move which will betray them. But, if all parties are arrested, all mouths and sources of information are instantly closed, and, in nine cases out of ten, though the authorities may be morally certain that they have the right parties, their discharge or acquittal will be the result, simply because no evidence of their guilt can be secured.

So, applying the result of my experience to this particular case, I reasoned that if the express clerk was arrested, and put where he could secure no assistance and sympathy, his accomplices would at once exhibit a nervousness and alarm which would definitely betray them.

According to this programme, Mr. Warner caused John Barker's arrest, formally charging him with the robbery, and intimating that the whole plan of his operations was known, and in every possible way endeavoring to secure from him a statement which would implicate others. But the young man was obdurate, and nothing save that which might be learned from an utterly innocent person could be got from him. He very *naively* admitted that he could readily see how he might be reasonably suspected; how the bending of the bolt apparently from the inside might be attributed to him, but he argued in the same breath that it might have been done by the party who did the work for the purpose of casting suspicion upon him.

The closest of watching could develop nothing of a suspicious nature against the assistant. He was a simple, hard-working fellow, who seemed to be merely dazed and stunned by the robbery,

and it seemingly had not once entered his head that he could be suspected of any manner of complicity in the matter.

But the results from watching Henry Barker, who had married the “wealthy Chicago lady,” were far different.

He endeavored to keep quietly at home in Columbus, and it was observed that he never left his mother’s house for any purpose until after night had wrapped its protecting folds around the city. Neither did he, after his brother’s arrest and incarceration, visit him, or attempt in any manner to communicate with him, and I was more than ever satisfied of his guilt.

On the evening of the fifth day succeeding the robbery, Henry Barker suddenly took a train for Chicago. He did not leave Columbus like an honest man, but sneaked about the depot until the train was well under way, when he sprang aboard, giving my operative all he could do to accomplish the same thing and accompany him. At a way station the detective telegraphed me the condition of affairs, and I had two men at the depot in Chicago awaiting their arrival, one to relieve the man accompanying Barker, and another—my son William, to get a thorough look at Barker, so that he might be able to render any assistance necessary.

Barker at once proceeded to his “wealthy wife’s” rooms in a disreputable quarter of the city. Here he remained well closeted from observation, but so thoroughly guarded that his escape was impossible, for one day. Then, with a small valise which his wife had been seen to purchase for him at a pawn-shop near their habitation, he set out leisurely in the morning, considerably changed in personal appearance but perfectly self-possessed and evidently with no fear of pursuit, for the Michigan Central depot.

Arriving here he purchased a paper and a cigar, and smoking the one and occasionally glancing at the other, he sauntered about the locality for a short time, when he walked to the ticket office and purchased a ticket for Canada, via the Michigan Central and Grand Trunk railroads. This much done and he went to the train, took a seat in the smoking-car, and resumed the reading of his paper as pleasantly and nonchalantly as though a reputable business man starting out on a summer trip to the Thousand Islands.

His presence at the depot had been reported to me immediately, and I authorized my son, William A. Pinkerton, to make the arrest. A carriage took him to the depot from my office in five minutes, and he arrived at the train at the same time as young Barker. Following him into the car, he waited until Barker had seated himself comfortably, when William approached him and said, pleasantly:

“Barker, sorry to annoy you, but you will have to delay your trip to Canada until later in the season. The express folks down at Columbus want you.”

He made no resistance at all, but came along quietly, seeming to feel grateful that he had been arrested in a gentlemanly manner.

He was then placed in the car which had conveyed William to the depot, and my son, taking a seat beside him, and an officer riding on the box with the driver, the whole party were in my private office in a few minutes.

He made no noise and seemed in no great degree alarmed. He submitted to being searched with the best of grace, not over fifty dollars being found upon his person. I was beginning to fear we had made a mistake, when I ordered one of the men to remove the lining of the valise. Barker grew deathly pale when I said this, but he said nothing.

This precaution rewarded me by discovering, neatly secreted within the lining, fourteen thousand dollars. Even then he had nothing to say, and I concluded to let him think the matter over for a little time while on the train to Columbus, which he, an officer, and myself were on board of the same night, Barker pretty well ironed, more for the effect I hoped it would have on him than from any fear that he would attempt to escape.

I gave strict orders that no word should be spoken to the man by any person, and engaging a stateroom of the sleeper for our party, shut him and the officer within it, compelling the officer to sit there like a sphinx, looking wise as an owl, but uttering never a word.

Late in the night, Barker could stand the silence and suspense no longer, and he begged piteously of his guard to permit him to speak to me. For a time he silently shook his head, but at last called me, when the poor fellow broke down altogether, begged piteously for mercy, and revealed where twenty-five thousand dollars of the stolen money could be found buried in a vacant lot next that occupied by his mother's house, and gave me the whole particulars of the robbery, which I telegraphed in advance to Mr. Warner, who, with this aid, had secured a like full and free confession from the incarcerated express clerk, before our arrival at Columbus at noon of the next day.

The robbery had been planned by Henry Barker, and was the simplest thing in the world after his brother, the clerk, had consented to his share in it. The door was conveniently left open; the assistant was given a heavy dose of chloroform; then the clerk himself opened the safes and selected the packages of value for removal. Then the appearance of general confusion was arranged, and after the bolt had been bent to give the impression that the door had been forced from the outside, Henry had given his brother a mild dose of chloroform, and departed with every dollar that the office contained, twenty-five thousand of which he had buried, and fifteen thousand of which he had taken with him from Columbus, it being the intention of the express clerk to join his brother in Canada when the storm had blown over a little.

But:

“The best laid schemes o’ mice and men  
Gang aft agley!”

and the two robbers were subsequently given four years each in the penitentiary, while the company was highly elated that I had been the means of recovering for them thirty-nine thousand

dollars, out of what seemed an absolute loss of forty thousand dollars, and that, too, all within eight days.

Allan Pinkerton, *Criminal Reminiscences and Detective Sketches*. New York: G.W. Dillingham, 1878.

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