

## *Tracking a Criminal*

### The Story of a Pinkerton Detective

While a member of Pinkerton's detective force I made the arrest of a highway robber at Madison, Wis. He was arrested for a robbery committed in Illinois five months before, and I had been on the case two months when I finally ran him down. He was a machinist by trade, and was then working in a shop. I proved him to be an old crook and a dangerous one, and was satisfied that he went into the shop to baffle pursuit; but it seemed to strike others differently. The reporters wrote him up as one anxious to reform, and they wrote me down as a bloodhound hanging to his trail, and so considerable public sympathy was aroused for him. I then had proofs of four other crimes committed by him, any one of which would send him to prison, but I had to keep silent and take public criticism. My man got a sentence of five years, and he had scarcely departed for prison when I received through the mail a note reading:

“You have by money and perjury sent an honest man to prison. You know he was honest and hardworking. You wanted to glorify yourself. The poor fellow is a friend of mine, and I have sworn to revenge him. Take notice that I will have your life on the first opportunity.”

There was no signature to the letter, but I knew at a glance that the writer meant business. It was a plain, bold hand, and after half an hour's study I made these deductions:

1. It was written by a crook.
2. It was written in prison.
3. The writer was in dead earnest.
4. He was a large, muscular man, with light hair, blue eyes and fair complexion.
5. He would wear a silk hat and darkish clothes.
6. He would aim to either throttle me or strike me down with a club.

How did I reach these conclusions? Well, the average detective catches on to a crook's chirography by instinct. It was written on a half sheet and the pen and ink were poor. The paper was creased and soiled, and I felt certain that the writer had passed it to a prisoner about to be discharged. The latter had mailed it to me in an envelope addressed by himself. The chirography of the letter was bold and earnest. Large men are more sympathetic than small ones. Large men who betray this sentiment are of sanguine temperament. They are also vain and dress well and in taste. Large men seldom ambush a victim; they depend on their strength.

That is about the way I figured it out, and I was so firmly satisfied that I was right that I founded my [program] accordingly, and permitted no change to creep in. I further believed that the writer would not be out of prison under a month, and I had ample time to get ready for him. Had he been out, he would not have written. If he had several months to serve he would not have written. I was a bachelor, then, having a room on Stale street and taking my meals at a restaurant. My room was reached by private stairs, and I alone had the key to the street door. From a side window in my room to a side window in a real estate office was only a distance of five feet. As there were bars on the other window I had left mine unguarded. I now had them put on, and there

was no way to reach me in my room except to open the street door and come up stairs. I had the inside of the door covered with sheet iron, and arranged a spring gun for the stairs.

Was I afraid? No, I had plenty of confidence in myself, and I wanted to get the drop on the stranger first. He had pitted his wit, nerve, and courage against mine, and my professional pride was aroused. He had a big advantage in knowing me and my habits, and it was only fair to offset this by taking some extra precautions.

I gave the writer of the anonymous letter thirty days to come out of the prison, and ten more to get himself in shape to begin the campaign. I was not far wrong. On the thirty-eighth day after receiving the warning, as I boarded a State street car to come down town, my man was a passenger. He was a man who exactly corresponded to the picture I had drawn, and it never occurred to me that I could be wrong. While I was sizing him up from the corner of my eye I saw that he was taking my measure. I purposely turned my head to let him see a scar on my neck, and when I glanced at him again I was sure that he was satisfied of my identity. Now, the chase had begun. He had sworn to have my life, and I knew by the set of his jaw and the compression of his lips that he had still further resolved. Where had he been in prison, and what for? His face was strange to me. Had I desired to take an unfair advantage of him I could have run him in as a suspect, or trumped up some charge to hold him and investigate his record, but I wouldn't do that. It was to be a fair fight. He would ask for no outside help, and pride would forbid me to.

When I left the car he followed me to the office, I stopped at the door to speak to a messenger, and he asked the messenger who I was. Then he had me "dead," as the saying is, and there was room for no further doubt. It so happened that at that time I was detailed on a case in the city. But for this I should have been going and coming, and he would have had hard work to keep me in view. I was very regular in my routine. I had my meals at the same hour each day and at the same place. At a certain hour in the evening I went to a certain hotel, played three games of pool, drank one glass of beer, sat and smoked a cigar, and then took the car to my door and went to bed. The dullest kind of a plowboy could have picked up my trail.

On the evening of the second day my would-be murderer appeared at the billiard room of the hotel as I was playing my first game of pool. I was expecting him, and I so arranged it as to ask him to play the next two games. He was puzzled and nervous. If he was nervous over the idea of handling a cue alongside of a man whose life he was plotting to take, I was excusable for feeling a bit queer to find my would-be assassin offering me a cigar and praising my skill. I entertained him better than he did me, because I knew his game and he supposed me ignorant of it. When I was ready to leave for home I invited him to meet me at the hotel the next evening. He smilingly assented but next instant compressed his lips. This meant "This detective is not the fellow I supposed he was. He is pleasant and chatty and wants to be friendly, and I rather like him. But he sent my friend to prison, and I have sworn to take his life. He shall not escape me."

That night some one broke a skeleton key in the lock of my street door. How foolish to suppose I would trust to locks! It was no doubt my friend, making his first attempt on my life. It is a curious trait in criminal nature that two out of five men will abandon an undertaking if meeting with disappointment on a first attempt. Those who persevere become more dangerous than before. It was a question now of how my enemy would act, but I was satisfied as soon as I set

eyes on him the next evening. At sight of me he compressed his lips. The failure had fired his zeal, and I realized that from this on I must certainly be on my guard every hour in the twenty-four.

We played the three games together, sat side by side and smoked our cigars, and an outsider would have supposed us the best of friends. The man perhaps feared that I would wonder and speculate about him, and he handed me his card and explained that he had come on from East expecting to engage in the lumber business. His name was printed as "S. R. McKnight." Could I be mistaken in him, you ask? I had no doubt that he was the writer of the threatening letter. If I had doubted something occurred as we sat smoking that would have re-assured me. A man who was known to me to be crooked entered the billiard room for a drink. He started in surprise at seeing McKnight, and was about to approach him with extended hand when a signal stopped him. Unless McKnight was a "fly" man he could have no knowledge of the other. I pretended to see vacancy, and parted with my enemy in the greatest good nature. That night an attempt was made to bore a panel out of my door, but the bit was stopped by the sheet iron.

I did not see McKnight the next evening nor the next, but he showed up on the third evening and explained that he had been to Milwaukee. I knew better. He had been trying to work out some new plan to get at me, and had spent a portion of the time at a crook's resort. He had hit upon a plan. I knew this from the cordiality of his greeting, and all through our games I was wondering what scheme he had hit upon. It was revealed to me at midnight that very night. I had a bell on my door, and at that hour it was vigorously pulled. In case of my being wanted at the office the messenger was instructed to ring in a certain manner. As this was not his ring I waited for a few minutes, when the bell jangled more vigorously than before. I slipped on my pants and went down and opened the slide in the door. McKnight stood there, and when I asked what was wanted he replied:

"Really, old fellow, I am sorry to have troubled you, but I came to ask your advice. I was handed a very queer letter after I left you, and I want you to read it and tell me how to act. I'll go upstairs with you."

I told him that one of our men was occupying the room with me that night, and advised him to see me at the office next morning. He had planned to get to my room and pounce upon me, but I snuffed the game. He did not show up again. He may have believed that I suspected him, and was determined to keep out of my way until he appeared to strike the fatal blow. Next door to me, on the down-town side, was a vacant lot. One day, a week after last seeing McKnight, several dry goods boxes were brought to this lot and piled up in such a way as to form a good hiding place next to my door. I scented an idea as I investigated, and that night, when within a square of the place, I met a couple of young fellows and offered them a quarter to go and displace the boxes, explaining that a vagrant had taken up his quarters there. They went with a whoop, and a man rushed out of hiding and ran off. It was McKnight.

The next day I was sent out of the city and was gone two weeks. I had not been back two hours when I discovered that a boy was dogging me about. He was no doubt in the pay of McKnight, who would now be ready for some other move. I had no sooner entered my room than I made the discovery that the window bars had been tampered with, two having been wrenched out and all

been loosened so that a little work would remove them. That night I asked a friend to stay with me. While I sent him to the room before dark I made my usual rounds and did not turn in until 11. If McKnight was looking for me he saw me. We turned out the gas, placed our revolvers at hand, and sat down near the window to wait. At 1 o'clock McKnight climbed a shed from the alley, entered the insurance office by a back window, passed through two rooms and appeared at the window opposite mine. When he had raised the sash he pushed a plank across the five feet of space and rested the end on my window ledge. It was a summer evening, and my sash was up, but so quietly did the man work that the lightest sleeper would have heard no sound. He waited and listened, and then came across. We moved to the right and left, and he could not see us as he put his face to the bars. He must have been certain that I was asleep, for he began work, and soon had an opening by which he could enter.

McKnight had come to kill me, but I did not thirst for his life. As he bent to enter the window I fired over his head and uttered a shout. He straightened up, lost his balance, swung half way round, and tumbled to the ground. It was only from the second story, and had he alighted on his feet he might not have been hurt. But he turned over and struck head first, and never knew what hurt him, his neck being broken by the collision. When he was dead he was identified as a new Orleans crook named Red Pete, and when he wrote me the letter he was in Joliet Prison. His only weapon was a knife, but one thrust of that would have settled me forever.

*The Waterloo [IN] Press*, November 1, 1888

*The Daily Republican* [Monongahela, PA], November 21, 1888

*The Lafayette [LA] Advertiser*, January 12, 1889

This story was reprinted as

“Balked of his Prey” in the *Clinch Valley [VA] News*, December 21, 1888

“Dealing with a Deadly Foe” in *The Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser* [AU], February 28, 1889

Both reprints include the addition of the following introductory paragraph before the story:

“If you were certain in your own mind that a man sought your life, and that he would not desist until one or the other of you were dead, the feeling would be a strange one. No matter how brave you were, you could not hide your anxiety and alarm. No matter how strong your nerve, you would feel broken up. Let me send you word today that I seek your life, and will not rest until I have seen you dead at my feet, and an hour after you receive the message you will be a changed man. You can't help but worry, and the more you worry the sooner your nerve will go. If I was to fight you fair and openly, you would not hesitate. It is the knowledge that I am to strike you at an unexpected moment, that I may stab you in the street car, shoot you down in the park, cut your throat while you sleep, that unsettles you and makes your flesh creep.”