

# The Case Book of a Private Detective

True Narratives of Interesting Cases by a Former Operative of the William J. Burns Detective Agency

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## A MATTER OF INTUITION

How the Brundage Novelty Company Robbery Was Uncovered

At one time in the history of detective work, possibly, the sole function of the detective was to detect crime and criminals. This still is the function for which official detectives, those employed by city, state or nation, exist. But in this day of hectic business competition there has grown to startling proportions another use for the private detective agency; and the ways and means in which the public is learning to use and misuse the service which any detective agency places at their beck and call for \$3 a day, often have little or nothing in common with the original purposes of the detective's profession.

Probably one half the business that comes to the private detective agency is "business," instead of crime. Firms hire private detectives to spy on a competitor; employers hire them to look up the conduct of employees after business hours. There are private detective agencies so unscrupulous that you can engage their operatives for almost any service, no matter how low. Then, again, there is the Burns Agency, of which I was an operative, which will not touch a piece of business that is not obviously and absolutely square. But even pursuing this policy, without wavering, they are at times led into weird and wonderful paths of business mazes; and the work often is no less thrilling than the pursuit of vicious criminals.

The Brundage Novelty Company case was one of the most interesting jobs of any kind that I ever tackled.

On the first of September, 1910, our agency received a telephone call from the Knickerbocker Hotel. The call was: "Please pick out a man whom you know you can trust in every way and send him up here to room L 98."

The caller refused to give his name or to mention the purpose for which he wanted a detective.

"I'll explain all that satisfactorily to you after I have seen whether you have a man whom I consider capable of handling my business," was his answer to the office manager's request for more information.

"That's a queer one," muttered the manager, and he took the call in to the chief.

"Better send Cornell up there to see what it is," said the chief. "We won't touch it if it doesn't look good."

I at once took the subway to Times Square, and a few minutes later I knocked at room L 98. The door was opened by an old man of patriarchal appearance, one in whom the dreamer and the man of efficiency seemed strangely combined. He peered at me for possibly 30 seconds through the six inches of opening he had made.

"Come in," he said. After he had shut and locked the door he added: "You're from the Burns Agency, of course. Sit down."

I sat. The old man stood before me with his hands on his hips. Usually it is the detective who stands and scrutinizes and analyzes his client, but in this case the usual order was reversed.

"How old are you?" said the old man presently.

"Thirty-six," I replied.

"Married?"

"Yes."

"Children?"

"Three."

"Got a picture of your wife or any of the children with you?"

I looked at him and began to smile.

"Now look here, sir," I said; "so far as I understand it, you sent for a detective—"

"Young man," said he, holding up his hand in great dignity, "do not be impatient, please. Please answer my questions. Call it humoring an old man, if you will. There is a reason. Now, again; have you a picture of your wife or children with you? Do you carry one?"

"More out of curiosity to see what he was driving at than anything else, I replied that I did carry such a picture, and opening my watch showed him the tiny picture of my little family that was pasted on the inside of the case.

"Good," said he. "Do you carry any life insurance?"

"You old shark!" I said, laughing.

"So that's what you got me up here for? Well, that's certainly a new dodge for an insurance agent."

"Young man, young man—don't, please," said he. "Answer my question, if you please."

"Yes," I said, "I do."

"Good!" Then he drew a chair up before me, and sat down, rubbing his hands.

"I must have a decent man, a fairly good man, a man I can believe in to handle this business," said he. "That is why I asked those apparently aimless questions. A married man is more dependable than a single one; a man who thinks a lot of his family is most dependable of all—for my purpose. And a man who thinks a lot of his family will often carry a picture around with him, and carry life insurance for their benefit. Now do you understand me? That is my way

of finding out if I want to trust a man."

"Well!" said I. "Well," said he, "I believe I have been fortunate enough to find such a man at my first try. I believe I can trust you. My name is Ezra Brundage."

At first the name conveyed nothing to me.

"Inventor of the Brundage novelties," he continued, "and president of the Brundage Novelty Company, of Hoboken."

I placed him, then; I had seen his photograph in the advertisements of the Brundage novelties.

"What is it that you want me to do, Mr. Brundage?" I asked.

"I want you," said he, "to satisfy me that the Brundage Novelty Company is not being robbed."

Then he went on to explain. It seems that he had no definite reason for being suspicious. He said it was only his intuition that told him all was not right in the company. He said that a sense of wrong-doing on the part of someone in the office had impressed him several weeks before; that the impression had grown until he had begun to investigate, and though he could find no signs, he now was fully convinced that the company—and therefore himself—was being robbed.

"Intuition entirely, Mr. Cornell," he said. "But all my life I have listened to my intuition, even in my business dealings, and I find that it guards me better than anything else I know."

"Whom do you suspect?" I said bluntly.

"Mr. Cornell, I am in partnership with a young man named Gerber."

"And he's the man, is he?"

He bowed. "I am afraid so, though I dislike to say it. Mr. Gerber is a young man, and hitherto I have thought him the soul of honor—one whom it was a privilege and pleasure to associate with."

"And how do you think he's getting away with the loot?"

He thought it over for a few seconds and said slowly: "I do not know. That is what I want you to find out. He is our treasurer, and so has charge of all the finances of the firm."

"Well," said I, "are there any details you can give me? Any pointers?"

"None," he said. "But I have this suggestion to make; that you go to work in our office as a clerk where you will have opportunities for close observation."

"To watch you partner, Gerber?"

"To watch Mr. Gerber. I place the case in your hands; watch Mr. Gerber."

Back to the office I went to report to the chief.

"I thought you would find sort of a queer bird from the way he phoned," said the chief. "But business is business; he's retained us for the job, and your job is to watch Gerber. However, don't be so slow as to merely follow his suggestion about going to work in the office. Beat the old man to it; look up Gerber—after hours. You'll get more there, probably, than you would in the office."

Under these instructions I went over to Hoboken at once with another man to get a "spot" on Gerber, who was unknown to me. "Getting a spot" on a man in detective parlance signifies this process: one detective enters an office or place of business and asks for the man that is wanted. Meeting him, he makes some excuse and gets away. At the door of the place he waits for the man to come out. Across the street is another detective. When the man who is to be shadowed comes out the first detective signals to the man across the street in some unobtrusive way, and drops out. In this case Cluffer, the man who went with me, entered the offices of the Brundage Novelty Company and asked for Mr. Gerber. Having met him Cluffer merely applied for a position—and was turned down. When Gerber came out at 5 in the afternoon Cluffer, standing near the office entrance, took a paper from his pocket and began to read it—the signal we had agreed upon. Then Cluffer went back to New York, and I, whom Gerber had never seen, took up the trail. In this way all chance for suspicion on the part of the subject is eliminated.

For the next three days we "took him up in the morning and put him to bed at night." That is, from the moment when he left his house in the morning to when he retired for the night, Gerber never was out of sight of a detective.

By day, in the office, I had him under my eye, having gone to work there as a clerk. Outside of the office another man from the agency watched him, no matter where he went. Gerber didn't have a chance to make a move that wasn't reported on.

But nothing developed in this time, and I went to the chief and reported my belief that old Brundage was half cracked and that his suspicion was nothing more or less than a hallucination, a brainstorm, to put in bluntly.

"Well, don't let that worry you," said the good natured chief. "Brundage is paying the bill. He's good for it, and there's nothing more import-

ant on hand for you just at present. And, say, Cornell, don't you fool yourself too much about that old fellow having a brainstorm. He's a pretty wise old bird. Any man who can invent the scores of little things that he's put on the market, and run a successful business at the same time, is no fool, let me tell you. The thing may develop into a freak case, but believe me, old Brundage has some real reason for incurring our bill."

The fifth day of the case a roughly dressed young man came in to see Gerber. Gerber took him into his private office and closed the door, so it was impossible for me to see or hear what went on between them. But the fact that such secrecy had been observed put me on my guard, and when the young fellow came out I managed to have something to do that brought me near to him. It seems ridiculous, possibly to the layman, to mention as the starting point in an exciting case a whiff of an odor, but such was the real starting point of the Brundage Novelty Company case from my standpoint.

I caught the odor of gasoline from this young man as he swept out of Gerber's private office.

Of course the thing meant nothing at the time. It suggested nothing. The only situation opened by it was this: Gerber had some dealings of a private nature with a young man who smelled of gasoline.

At the same time, it opened up another possible clue for us to work on, for in our previous investigation we had not found Gerber in any dealings with anybody who smelled of gasoline or who might have occasion to use that fuel. As our task was to investigate all angles of Gerber's career, with a view to finding something to substantiate old Brundage's indefinite suspicions, the young man with the gasoline odor promptly became an interesting factor.

Across the street was one of our men, waiting. When the gasoline man

on the young man who had been in to see Gerber.

"He's the engineer of a fifty foot gasoline launch, the Nadine, that is lying in the Hudson opposite Forty-second street," Dawson reported. "The boat's owner is said to be a Mr. Russell."

"Said to be?"

"Yes; because I hung around and wormed out a description of this 'Russell' from a lot of fellows hanging around the docks, and he comes pretty close to looking like Mr. Gerber, if these fellows were right."

Still, this meant nothing so far as any case was concerned. But when I made enquiries about the office to find out if Gerber went in for motor-boating, and found he had expressed himself as having an aversion to the water, the thing began to look as if there might be something in it. If the boat, The Nadine, belonged to Gerber, he was keeping it a secret; and if he had secrets they might be connected with Brundage's suspicions of something wrong in the firm.

Strange to say, as I continued to watch Gerber, I too, began to acquire a suspicious feeling toward him, just as the senior partner had done. There was no tangible reason why this should be so. His actions apparently were what they should be. But there was something wrong with the man. That is as well as I am able to explain it. He wasn't "right." I have felt this intuition—or "hunch," in detective parlance—several times in my career; and the experiences have convinced me that the detection of crime could be made an exact psychological science, that each and every guilty person carries about him certain signs—or possibly an aura—which distinguishes him from the normal being. For guilt of a crime of any sort, after all, is an abnormality.

Gerber, in his office, and in his life after business hours, apparently went along as an honest man in his position should. But the more I studied

and he makes me tell everybody that the boat is owned by a chap named Russell. Now, what would he be doing that for? I—"

He shut up suddenly then, realising in drunken fashion that he had gone too far.

After Dawson had made this report he went off the case, being called in to the New York office. For the next week, or until September 25th, I worked on Gerber in every way I knew how, without finding a thing. On the 25th he failed to show up at the office. A telephone call to his house elicited the fact that he had left at about midnight and had not returned.

I had a hunch on the instant, and calling a taxi drove to the place where the Nadine had been docked. The slip was empty, the boat was gone. From men around the docks I found that the boat had disappeared in the night without being seen, that nobody had known it was going, and that nobody knew where it had gone.

I went back to the office and told Brundage all I knew.

"Hm!" said he, and together we went to the safe. Brundage tried to open it, he and Gerber having had the combination together. He failed. For half an hour he tried, and then he gave up and telephoned for an expert from the safe company.

When the safe finally was opened the books were placed at once in the hands of an expert accountant. He found the discrepancy within half an hour.

"It is one of the clumsiest cases of juggling I ever saw," he said. "As near as I can tell on this short examination, the cash is \$15,000 short. Apparently it has been short for a long time, because I see that the juggling of figures has been going on for months."

"Hm," said Brundage. "For months, eh? I was slow. Mr. Cornell, your task is simplified now; you have only to find Mr. Gerber."

Yes, that was all, but that was

description was on the Hudson. The Nadine had disappeared.

I went back to the slip in Hoboken and began to work among the launchers along the docks. The Nadine had been under their eyes constantly and finally one of them let drop the remark that put me on the scent.

"Wherever she went, she didn't go far," said this man. "They didn't have gasoline in her enough to run five miles, and there was no chance to get any when they 'shopped out at night.'"

If this was true the Nadine must have put in at some nearby dock to purchase gasoline if she intended to make a long trip. So far as we could find, she had not done this. There was a chance that the boat still was in the vicinity.

Working on this chance we began to search the net of boatyards. On the second day we found her. She was up high and dry, having been repaired, under the name of the Gull.

But for the waterman who had served the depletion of her fuel supply the boat might have lain there till it rotted before we noticed it, for the work of disguising her had been well done, and a boat on the blocks in dry-dock is of different appearance than a boat in the water.

I was forced to smile in admiration of Gerber when I found the Nadine. He had fooled us, and fooled us amazingly. We had thought it a certain thing that he had flown away up or down the river. He had worked artistically to this end. All he had done—as I discovered—when I located the engineer—was to telephone the latter to take the Nadine out at night and lay her up for repairs in the boatyard. Then he, Gerber, had hidden elsewhere, leaving us to chase away on his false, watery tracks. It was well done. It was better done than most crooked pieces of work. But like all crooks he had not stopped to consider the absolute certainty of being caught when there is plenty of money willing to be spent to effect a capture.

"Get him," directed Brundage. "I don't care how high the bills run; get that man."

After that it was only a question of time.

How is the net woven with such certainty around the hiding criminal? In Gerber's case, ten days after his defalcation was discovered, 10,000 circulars, containing his description and history and two cuts of him, were in the hands of as many trained men in all parts of the country. A thousand men, in all the large ports of the world, had these circulars three weeks later.

Gerber was not caught, however, until after three months had elapsed. Then one of his intimate friends—whom I was watching as the first person Gerber would be likely to communicate with—received a letter postmarked New Orleans, and addressed in a disguised hand. I had possession of the letter before the friend ever saw it—through a secret arrangement with the postal authorities. I opened it—and it was from Gerber. Copying the letter, word by word, I sealed it again, and sent it along to its destination. But before he ever received the letter I was on my way to New Orleans. I went straight to the general delivery window at the post office and waited. Gerber had directed his mail to be sent there. I got him that night. He came in with his hat over his eyes, and asked for a letter. When he turned away from the window I was standing before him.

"Hello, Gerber," I said, "I came down to bring you back to Hoboken."

He stood dumb for ten seconds. Then he blurted: "How in—did you ever do it? Haven't been out of my room in daylight since I came here."

"Oh, well," I said, "you come back like a nice boy and I'll tell you all about it on the train."

Brundage didn't prosecute Gerber. He said, "Fifteen thousand dollars is a big sum to lose. But it would be harder for me had I lost faith in my sense of intuition."

The Captain of His Soul.

Nearly blind, partly paralyzed and wholly helpless, Gen. Homer Lea, recently in command of the victorious Chinese revolutionary army, is reported to be returning to the United States. His ailments are not of recent origin. As a young man Homer Lea was frail and undersized.

Those who saw this lad a few years ago drilling companies of Chinese with broomsticks for rifles only laughed at the grotesque sight. But he refused to recognize his limitations. He drove force within him urged him on and made up for all deficiencies. So through the force of an indomitable personality he conquered more of life than is usually given to even the brilliantly endowed man of fine physique.

Stone walls do not prison make, nor iron bars a cage. Neither does physical frailty bar a person from achievement. Milton did his greatest work after he had become blind. Beethoven was deaf when he wrote the famous Ninth Symphony. Spencer did his work in spite of chronic invalidism. Stevenson wrote under sentence of exile to the South seas. The deaf, dumb and blind Helen Keller has made her life count.

Henley was right. A man is the master of his fate and the captain of his soul—if he will only take command.

Going Up.

"Would you vote for a man who offered you money?"

"I should say not," replied the shifty member of the legislature. "The days for that kind of transaction are past. A man who wants to clinch his influence has got to have a good business and slip me an interest in it."



"When he turned away from the window I was standing before him."

left the building I gave Dawson the signal to follow him. My man picked up the trail like a hound, and well satisfied that the mysterious young man would be followed to his destination, I turned back to my pretended occupation.

Mind, all this work was being done without any sane or definite reason for doing it. We didn't know whether Gerber was guilty of anything, or if he was guilty, of what it might be. We were working for Brundage, who had a suspicion, and so long as he paid the bill, and we had nothing more important to do, we would continue on the job.

I suggested to Mr. Brundage that he examine the books of the company for indications of anything wrong.

"I had thought of that long ago," said he. "But Mr. Gerber has all the books in his personal charge. He locks them up every evening. To secure them for an investigation it would be necessary to make a demand upon Mr. Gerber, and this naturally would arouse his suspicion. No. We will go on as we have begun. I am satisfied. If anything is wrong it will be shown, for Mr. Gerber is not permitted to remove the books from this office."

That evening I got Dawson's report

him the more I began to agree with Brundage that it was time he was investigated.

I put Dawson to work on the young engineer. Dawson rented a little motor boat, got permission to tie it up beside the fifty-footer in the young man's charge, and began to overhaul his engine, as if preparing for a cruise. This gave him an opportunity to borrow wrenches and oils from the larger boat, to buy drinks and cigars to pay for the favors, and so to strike up a close acquaintance with the man he was after.

Had that young man been strictly temperate it is doubtful if the Brundage Novelty Company case ever would have become a credit to the Burns Agency. Dawson plied him steadily with liquid refreshment in the saloons along the water front, and the young man began to talk about his employer.

"He's a queer crab," said the engineer. "He makes me keep this boat in running order day and night—makes me stay by it ready to repaint it at a minute's notice. Now what in the devil would a man want to have his boat repainted so suddenly for?"

"I couldn't guess," said Dawson.

"Then again," went on the intemperate engineer, "his name is Gerber

plenty. Here is how we laid down our theory of the situation: Gerber had gone away in the Nadine. He had probably had the boat repainted, renamed, and otherwise altered before leaving. He had left no sign of his route or destination. Our task was to comb the Hudson river up and down and pick out Gerber in his probably altered boat.

Dawson came over on the jump from the office.

"I sized the Nadine up carefully," said he. "I think I will know her even under a different name and different paint."

"Get the fastest boat for hire on the river," said Brundage. "Follow him and bring him back."

We got the Puritan, a semi-racer with a small cabin. Two hours after the discrepancy in Gerber's books had been found, Dawson and I were chugging up the Jersey side of the Hudson 20 miles an hour, with our eyes on the lookout for a launch that might be the Nadine. At the same time we notified all police chiefs of the towns along the river to be on the lookout for such a boat and for Gerber and his engineer. Four days of this sort of work, coupled with the efforts of the various police departments, showed us that no boat of this