

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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WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS

Nipping a New York Blackhand Conspiracy in the Bud

Pasquale Leoni came near to being one of the smoothest blackhand chieftains in this country. But not quite. He failed at the very outset of what would have been, had it succeeded in getting started, one of the most successful blackmailing and robbing conspiracies that ever emanated from the evil minds of the Italian Black Hand men who live by terrorizing their fellow countrymen in American cities.

Leoni ran a little private bank for the accommodation of his own countrymen in Elizabeth street, in the lower Italian quarter of New York City. He made no pretense of doing a big business, nor of securing his depositors and patrons against loss by any great capital of his own. He had started in as a steamship agent, selling tickets for a couple of the lines that make a specialty of carrying the cheaper class of passenger trade between New York and the Mediterranean ports. That was ten years before the events here to be related ever began.

From a seller of steamship tickets Leoni began to branch out, and soon he was running a little Italian employment agency in conjunction with his original business. He satisfied everybody concerned with his dealings in this, and soon the Italian emigrants who had found work through his office began to entrust to him the task of conveying safely to the loved ones back in Italy part of the funds earned by the newcomers in America.

The private bank was the next step. The newly arrived Italians were loathe to trust their hard-earned money with any of the strange bankers in this strange land. Leoni was one of them, a son of their own beloved Italy. He had welcomed them upon their arrival at Ellis Island, he had brought them up the bay and found them rooms in the crowded quarters of the east side. Work they had secured through him, and their steps in the new land had been generally guided by his advice. What more natural than that they should turn to him when they began to accumulate little sums of money which they wished to save?

Leoni took care of their money with great satisfaction to them and considerable profit to himself. His power and influence, and the prosperity of his little private bank—so private that the state bank examiners had nothing to do with it—grew until in March, 1911, he had on deposit in his Elizabeth street office over \$150,000 placed in his care by his trusting countrymen.

I had never heard of Leoni until he came to the office of the Burns Detective Agency and asked for protection.

"It is the Black Hand—the Mano Nera—that is after me," he said. "They have threaten me. Me, Pasquale Leoni, whom all good Italians trust—these bad men have threaten that they shall take my life or I am to give them \$25,000."

He dove into his pocket as he spoke and showed us a letter written in Italian and addressed to him. Translated it read:

"Dear Prosperous Brother:
"Many of the countrymen are out of work. Times are not as rich with all as they are, with you. Those who have much should help those who have little or nothing. Brother, you have much; we have nothing. You should be glad to help. There are many of us. That we all should get a little you must give much. But it is not much to you, who has so much. Brother, you must have \$25,000 to give us in two weeks when we ask for it, or we will remove you as a traitor to your poor countrymen."
"The Beautiful Society."

It was a typical Black Hand letter, except that the amount was away beyond the usual demand.

"How did you have the nerve to come here about this?" asked the office manager. "You know Italians usually are afraid to speak even to their wives about communications of this sort."

"To the police I would not go," said Leoni. "But you I think I can trust. Anyhow, I will die before I give up this money. I want you to protect me by finding the writer of this letter and putting him in jail. I have heard that you do such things very well."

The office manager turned to me. "Want to take the case, Cornell?" he asked. "We don't usually touch anything of this sort."

"Certainly," I said. "It's all part of the game to me."
Leoni and I got together then. I took the letter and examined it carefully. It was in a fairly good handwriting and carefully punctuated and phrased. Apparently it was the work of an educated man.

I reasoned that this letter probably was the work of one of the men whom Leoni had had dealings with in one way or another. Probably somebody who had deposited money with him and who knew how prosperous the private banker was becoming.

"How did the letter come to you?" I asked.

"It was shoved under the door at night," he said. "I found it when I open store in the morning."

I put the letter under a microscope and examined it carefully.

"Did it come just the way it was?" I asked.

"Yes."
"No envelope?"
"No, nothing but what you have there."

That didn't sound good to me. Under the microscope the letter failed to show any of the dust or dirt that would have adhered to it if it had been carried uninclosed and, without a cover, pushed under the door of an Elizabeth street store. The letter was crisp and clean, as if it had been taken from an envelope that had sheltered it in its travels until very recently.

"Is this the only letter of this sort you have?" I asked.

"No, no," he laughed. "There were others. I tore them up. I paid no attention to them until this one came. It names a time when I must have the money ready. That is why I came here."

"Were the letters all in this handwriting?" I asked.

He was a little slow in answering. "Yes," he said, finally. "Yes, all the same handwriting."

"All right," I said; "let's go down to your office."

He grumbled at this.

"It would not do for me to be seen with you," he protested. "The society has eyes everywhere. If you come to Elizabeth street with me its spies will see and they will get suspicious. Then they will kill me as a warning for others to be careful."

"All right," said I. "When can I come to see you?"

"You want to see me in the office?"

"Yes, in your office."

"That is absolutely necessary?"

"Yes," I said, "it's necessary."

"All right, all right," he said. "Come tonight then, at ten. The street will be crowded so that you can slip in without being noticed."

I put on some old clothes that night and slouched through the crowds in Elizabeth street until I reached Leoni's store. I went in, pretending to have some business at the banking window, and when no one was looking I slipped back into the office.

"I want to take a look at your books first of all," I said.

He was puzzled, but he turned over to me his books. He had kept the signatures of his depositors in a single big book, and this was what I looked over most carefully.

I found what I had hoped to find. About a year before one "Ignacio Martina" had written his name and his address, "Whitefish, Wis.," in Leoni's signature book in the same fine Italian hand that had written the threatening letter. There was no mistake in it. The writing was too distinctive to be confused.

I was on the point of telling Leoni what I had found, but on second thought I reasoned: "Here is an excitable Italian, half crazed with fear, and if I tell him what I think I have found he'll go up in the air, and if he doesn't plot to take his private vengeance he's almost sure to let someone know what he's been told." So I said nothing, but looked through the book without comment. After a short time I left Leoni, telling him I'd call him up in a day or two.

"Do you think you can catch them?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. "It's pretty hard for an American to get onto the crooked ways of these fellows, but we've never failed on a case yet."

"Ah," he said. "But you never had a case like this?"

"No," said I; "that's true, too."

When I got back to the office the manager said: "Well, how do you like Black Handing as far as you've gone?"

"That's a funny looking case to me," I said. "It looks too easy to be true."

I told him what I had found, and what my theory shaped up like.

"Oh, drop it if you want to," he said. "I don't think we care to be mixed up in that sort of a mess. Do just as you please about it."

I had already made a start on the case and had discovered what I was inclined to believe was a striking clue. The attraction of the man-hunt had me, and I said:

"I'll go on with it for a while at least, if you don't mind."

Next day I went down to the Federal building and looked over the names of Italians who had applied for citizenship in this country. There I found "Ignacio Martina's" name again, and in the same handwriting as the Black Hand letter that Leoni had received. I called up Leoni's bank on the phone. Leoni didn't happen to be in. If he had been this story probably would never have been told. His clerk was in and in answer to my question he looked up his books and found that Ignacio Martina still was living in Whitefish, Wis., that he got his mail at the general delivery, and that he was a tall thin man with a thin face.

I left for Whitefish that day. Thirty hours later I was asking the postmistress of that little town if she had any mail for "Ignacio Martina." She had. Of course she knew that I wasn't Martina so she wouldn't hand over the letter, but I had a glimpse of it and saw that it was from New York.

I spotted Martina next day. He was a villainous, though intelligent looking fellow who lived in the Italian settlement of the town without any visible means of support. Now see how pure luck often makes a case for a detective with scarcely any effort of his own.

There was in Whitefish a private Italian banker operating much after the manner of Leoni in New York. The Italians who lived in the town were mostly men who worked on the railroad, and their families. They had begun to settle in the town a few years before, and one Frank Cantino, a white-headed old Calabrian, had taken upon himself the burdens of king of this Little Italy. He made himself political boss of his countrymen first; then he became their banker. He was much respected and liked by his countrymen and by Americans as well. I found this out on the third day of my visit to Whitefish because on the night of that day Cantino was murdered in the room in the rear of his little private bank.

The murder was a terrible shock to the peaceful little town. Nothing of the sort had ever happened in its history. The tragedy had occurred on Main street, no later than ten o'clock, and was a crime of the boldest and bloodiest sort. Cantino had been stabbed seven times, and any one of the cuts would have been fatal.

I reached Cantino's office a few minutes after the alarm had been spread. There were no signs of a struggle and no disorder of any kind. Cantino apparently had been stabbed first in the neck as he was turning away from his assailant—stabbed by someone whom he did not fear—and after that the assassin had wreaked

However, I went at once down to the house where Martina had boarded. He was not in. He had gone back to the old country the night before. He had purchased his railroad and steamship ticket of old Cantino several days earlier, and last night he had gone, leaving the house at nine o'clock.

I went from there down to the station and found that Martina had taken the midnight train for Milwaukee. He would have had plenty of time to commit the murder.

At once I wired the New York office of the Burns Agency what had happened and to have them watch the boats of the Italian line on which Martina had bought tickets. After this I caught a train back to New York, taking with me the threatening letters received by Cantino. To while away the tedium of the long journey I took these letters out to re-read. Studying them more carefully now I was struck with the impression that I had seen that hand-writing somewhere before. I was sure of it. I had a piece of Leoni's writing in my possession. It was an address he had written for me in his office. I dug it up and carefully compared it with the Cantino letters. Then I got a shock. The letters were positively in Leoni's handwriting!

It took some time for the significance of this to sink in.

Martina had written Leoni in New York a practical duplicate of what Leoni had written Cantino in Whitefish, Wis. Leoni, the banker, who had come to us with a threatening letter, had written the same kind of a letter himself to a banker in Wisconsin. And Martina had left Whitefish the night that Cantino was murdered.

Meanwhile the New York office of our agency was watching the boats that sailed for Mediterranean ports. Every 200 miles or so I would get a wire advising me that such and such a boat had sailed and nobody answering the description of my man had come aboard. Every time I opened a wire I hoped to see the news that

I said to myself: "You big fool! You guessed wrong, absolutely wrong."

I went back to the office and began to write up my reports, trying to find a flaw in the theory I had worked out. Since I had been up against Leoni and had played my big card and hadn't brought anything out I felt that my theory must be wrong. His expression absolutely had convinced me. But as I wrote and rewrote the record of my doings since Leoni had applied at the office for a man, I couldn't see where in the world I had fallen down. If I was any good at all then I had worked up a case that pointed straight to the end I had worked toward. If it didn't point that way—But I hated to believe that I had failed so completely.

Cantino had sold Martina tickets over the old Italia-Mediterranean line. Our men had been watching the docks and boats of that company closer than any other. Nobody approaching Martina's description had sailed on it. The second day that I was in New York the report came that the line wouldn't have another boat for two weeks, and that no reservations on that boat had been made from Whitefish, Wisconsin. There had been no reservation from Whitefish for two months.

"Stung!" said the agency superintendent. "Your man got away on some other line. I told you that you'd better let that Black Hand stuff alone."

But I had my own private hunch, in spite of the innocent expression on Leoni's face. I made myself a mental bet that Martina hadn't left this country, and that I knew just where to find him—in time.

It took some time. To make a long story short, I went to the tenement directly opposite Leoni's office in Elizabeth street and rented the two front rooms on the third floor. I was dressed in the clothes of the average Italian laborer, and while I was a little too tall for a fair specimen, a pair

had him covered. I called an officer and turned Martina over to him. Then as fast as a taxi could carry me I went downtown to detective headquarters, and from there to Leoni's in Elizabeth street.

We broke in the door, and Leoni jumped up with a gun in his hand. One of the plain clothes men twisted it away from him and dragged him out to where I was waiting.

"Good morning, Leoni," I said. "I just pinched your pal, Martina, and he confessed."

We had hard work keeping him from killing himself.

"That dog," he screamed. "That dog!"

Had Martina confessed? Oh, no; but before morning we had the whole story. Martina told on Leoni, and Leoni on Martina. They had framed up a Black Hand conspiracy that was a study in cunning. Leoni was to find out when any Italian banker had any money, and Martina was to go out and scare him. Leoni had made Martina write him the Black Hand letter so that he, Leoni, could appear as a victim of that society, thus lessening the possibility of suspicion that he was a member of it. But for that they might have been operating yet. As it was, they hadn't pulled off a single job. Martina had killed Cantino as a warning to other bankers. And I had caught the pair of them because Leoni foolishly had let me see a sample of Martina's handwriting.

The Federal authorities took Leoni off our hands. He is doing twenty years. The Wisconsin people gave Martina life in prison.

PLANS RELIGION FOR JAPAN

Mr. Izawa Would Have Center About the Divine Right of the Emperor.

Mr. Izawa, ex-vice-minister of education, is the originator of a plan to provide Japan with an entirely new religion. The new religious body, according to the Japan Advertiser, is to be called "The State Religious Community of Japan," and Mr. Izawa explains his proposal as follows:

"The Japanese Empire having been governed by one imperial family since the very beginning, the emperor possesses divine right. Such a policy can hardly be found in any other country. In China it has happened that the emperor abdicates his throne to be succeeded by one of his former subjects. Then, too, when the German emperor spoke once of his divine right, he was strongly criticised. But in Japan the emperor is the descendant of Ameno-minakanuchi-no-Kami, the creator of the world. Hence the imperial family being a divine race is entirely different from the race of Japanese.

"This Ameno-minakanuchi-no-Kami is the only creator of the world, and he has existed since the beginning and still exists. He is called emperor of Heaven in China, Buddha in India, and God in Western countries. My plan is to gather a religious community around our emperor for the purpose of cultivating among its members loyalty toward the emperor and of elevating their moral ideas.

"As to the citizens of other countries, they are all living under the gracious protection of the Creator of the world, so that they can become members of this religious community if they become subjects of the Japanese emperor.

Mental Processes in the Brain.

We have no facts which at present will enable us to locate the mental processes in the brain any better than they were located fifty years ago. That the mental processes may be due to cerebral activities we may believe, but with what anatomical elements the individual mental processes may be connected we do not know. Notwithstanding our ignorance, it would appear best and most scientific that we should not adhere to any of the phrenological systems, however scientific they may appear to be on the surface. We should be willing to stand with Brodmann, believing that mind is a function or an attribute of the brain as a whole, or is a concomitant of cerebral operations, but I am at least an unwilling to stand with the histological localizations on the ground of a special mental process for special cerebral areas or for special cerebral cell groups.—Shepherd Ivory Franz, in Science.

Unavailing Hero Worship.

Herman Perlet, the musical director and composer, was recruiting a philharmonic orchestra and had enlisted the services of an Italian acquaintance. Among the instrumentalists he procured was a very old man with an antiquated flute from which he was able to get a wheezy tone now and then. "Take him away!" ordered Perlet after the first rehearsal. "He can't play the flute. What! That man can't play a flute!" gasped the sponsor. "Not in this orchestra. Take him away!" "Maledetta!" He rolled his eyes heavenward. "That man can't play a flute!" And he beat his breast in indignation. "Why, that man he fights with Garibaldi!"

Cucumber 40 Years Old.

A dispatch from Findlay, O., to the New York American says: "Mrs. John F. Moore of Arcadia has a cucumber 40 years old. When she was Miss Sarah Lefferson, 40 years ago, she pulled a small cucumber with a portion of vine attached to it and stuck it in a bottle. When it grew large the cucumber was placed in a bottle and sealed, and to this day has retained its color and freshness.



Leoni jumped up with a gun in his hand.

terrible vengeance on his victim. Investigation proved that the bank had not been robbed. The safe was locked and Cantino's papers and property were all in order.

The local authorities began to seek for the motive for such a strange crime, but I put it down as Black Hand work at once. I reasoned that Cantino had been threatened even as my friend Leoni in New York, that he had refused to yield to the blackmailers, and that he had been slain as promised in the threats.

With the permission of the sheriff I began to go through the old man's papers. I had not searched long before I found what I was looking for. He had received threatening letters just as I deduced. There were three of them. The last one had threatened him with death in two weeks if he did not turn over a certain sum of money to "the man who comes and asks you for it." Apparently he had not done this, and he was killed as a consequence.

I was disappointed in those letters. I had expected to see them in the hand-writing of Martina. But they weren't. They were in another and quite different hand, an educated Italian hand, but not Martina's.

Martina had been arrested while trying to get out of the country, but nothing of the sort occurred.

When I reached New York city I didn't go to the office. I hailed a taxicab and had myself driven to within a couple of squares of Leoni's bank in Elizabeth street. Discharging the taxi man I walked down to the place, mingling with the crowd in a way to make myself inconspicuous. Leoni was back of the cashier's cage. I walked in.

"Hello, Mr. Leoni," I said. "Seen anything of Martina?"

Leoni was a good actor but not good enough.

"You haven't seen him, have you?" he said.

"Oh, yes," I said. "I saw him out in Whitefish. He killed a fellow by the name of Cantino out there the day before yesterday."

I never watched anybody closer in all my life than I did Leoni while I was telling him this. No Anglo-Saxon could have hidden what was going on in his mind the way that little Italian did. His expression was one of surprise, only surprise, that I should mention such a thing.

"How horrible!" he said. "How distressing!"
He did it so well that he fooled me.

of gold rings in my ears helped out the deception. I explained to the woman who rented the rooms that I was out of work and that I probably would be at home a lot during the daytime.

I was. Both daytime and night. There wasn't an hour in the twenty-four that I, or Cluffer, who came over to help me, didn't have an eye glued to the window that covered Leoni's front door. He had no back door or somebody would have covered that too.

It took just ten days to clear the thing up. It was about 3 in the morning. I was watching, and the street was empty. Along came a man in a mackintosh and knocked at Leoni's door. The door opened instantly and the man went inside. In about half an hour he came out, looked up and down the street, and hurried in the direction of Broadway, toward the subway. He thought he had hidden his tracks, but I rode up to Harlem in the subway with him just the same.

He got off at 125th street. I followed him, and under the light of the ticket seller's window I saw his face.

"Martina," I said, and he turned—with a gun in his hand.

I hadn't taken any chances, and I