

# The Case Book of a Private Detective

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

By DAVID CORNELL

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## THE HANDWRITING ON THE WALL

The Case of the Anonymous Letter Writer of Philadelphia

The reason for the prevalence of the anonymous letter writing evil is because of the apparent safety of the person guilty of this nuisance. A man of the anonymous letter writing type has an enemy. He is afraid to face him in the open, but he wants to hurt him. What easier or what more safe—apparently—than to write an unsigned letter containing information, alleged or real, or slander, which is certain to cause the assailed person harm, or at least considerable annoyance?

There is a certain type of cowardly person to whom the anonymous letter appeals as does the venetian stiletto to the vicious blackhand criminal. It is a means to harm, and—apparently—a safe one. What easier than to write a few lines in a disguised hand? Or on a typewriter? How can anybody trace a letter prepared in such a way and dropped in the mail box by stealth and in the dark of night? True, admits the letter writer to himself—or herself, for women are numerous among this element, such letters have been traced and their authors caught. But, reasons the intending writer, they did not take the necessary precautions to hide their tracks. It looks like a cinch. It looks safe. But—it isn't.

Any crime or misdemeanor that will place in the hands of a trained detective a piece of writing, pen or typewriter, or a piece of printing, or, in fact, any physical trace of a person's expression, is the least safe sort of wrong-doing in the world. No sort of wrong-doing is safe, of course, but the kind that leaves a trace of a person's identity in the hands of the men who get on the track is the kind most certain to be run down eventually.

This does not mean that it usually is a cinch for the detective to run down the average anonymous letter writer. On the contrary it is usually very hard, for the wrong-doer invariably has taken a multitude of precautions to throw his followers off the track. But the point is that the detective has in the letter a tangible clue to follow, and in the end it is practically certain that the writer will be caught.

My first experience with an anonymous letter writer came about in queer fashion. One day a young man, who looked the part of the bookkeeper that we afterwards found him to be, came into the New York office of the Burns agency and planked down three anonymous letters that he had received during the past few weeks. Here is one of them that gives the gist of the three missives:

"Dear Sir: You will never know who this letter comes from, but you may be assured that it is from a friend. You have a friend named Carlin, who is treasurer for the Blank Heating company. If you will spend more time in Carlin's company we will reward you in a manner that will surprise you, on the condition that you let no one know that you ever received this letter. Especially do not let Carlin know."

The name of the man who brought the letters in was Blake. He had come to us for advice. "We aren't giving away advice," said the office manager. "If you want us to find who wrote those letters to you and why they were written, we'll be glad to give you a man for \$3 a day and expenses. It may take some time to find the writer, so your bill probably would run up pretty high."

"Oh, I couldn't afford to hire a detective," said Blake. "I thought not," said the manager, and there the case ended for the time being.

Three months later, almost to a day, I got a call from a business house in a large nearby city to send a man there at once. I happened to get the call. I found my people to be the Continental Heating company. The name of the general manager was Haney. I didn't like him from the start.

"Mr. Cornell," said Haney, when I introduced myself, "I'm glad to see you, glad to see you, indeed. We've got a little matter here in this office, a queer matter, that we can't quite understand. We thought we had better have a detective in to look the thing over."

"What is it?" I asked. For answer he turned to his desk and drew out three letters and handed them to me.

Those letters, Mr. Cornell, have been received in this office in the last few weeks," said Haney. "Take a look at them."

"The letters were simply addressed 'Dear Sir,' without the name of the firm being mentioned. They were all about in the same tone. Here is a sample:

"Dear Sir: You are trying to land the contract for heating the five new school buildings. We know all about it. You have made the lowest bid. You don't

know that, because you're on the outside. We know, because we're on the inside. Yes, your bid is the lowest that has been turned in. We don't mind telling you that. It won't do you any good. You think that will land you the contract. Well, we don't mind telling you that it won't. The figures in the bids don't settle this contract by a long sight. We settle it. You know who we are. Now, the reason we write this to you is this: Come across.

"That's what will land you this contract, if you do land it. Come across. Come across strong. Show us that you're right, and we'll show you that we're right. Show us that you're not right and—good-by contract for you. You know who we are and you know how to get to us."

The letter ended abruptly. It wasn't signed. The other letters ran along in about the same strain, the third one being much in the nature of a threat, and assuring the firm that it had no chance in the world of landing this heating contract that it wanted so badly unless it began to show that "it was right" within the next week.

"I got that last letter yesterday," said Haney. "That week will be gone in five days. And we certainly do want that contract."

"Do you know who wrote the letters?" I asked, bluntly.

He looked at me in amazement.

"Know?" he said. "What do you think I am?" Do you suppose I'd be paying your agency \$3 a day and expenses if I knew who wrote those letters?"

"Hardly," I said. "Do you know who is responsible for their being written?"

Haney looked at me a little longer this time without speaking.

"No," he said. "No."

"But you could make a pretty close guess, couldn't you?" I went on.

"Yes," he said, "I could."

"Sure," I said. "There wouldn't be any sense to these fellows writing the letters if you couldn't. I suppose it's a bunch of grafting politicians who are trying to hold you up, isn't it?"

He gave me a look which was an undisguised attempt to read my thoughts.

"Yes," he said, "that's what we think, of course. That is what I and Mr. Garver, the president of the company, have agreed upon as the truth."

"Garver?" I said. "I haven't met him yet, have I?"

"Mr. Garver is president and owner of this company," said Haney. "He's an old man. I attend to all this sort of business."

"Doesn't he want to be in on this conference?" I said.

"No," said Haney.

I thought it over a little.

"Well," I said. "I want him to be here."

"What?" Haney began to get a little mad.

"It's a rule of our office," I explained.

Haney leaned back, mollified.

"Oh," he said, "if that's the case, all right. Mr. Garver doesn't like to trouble with such details, but if you insist—"

"I do."

"Then we can go into his private office."

We went in. Garver was an old man, as Haney had said. He was over seventy and was in poor health. His mind was quite as clear as it should be, but as I saw him and Haney together the contrast struck me too forcibly to be lost. Garver was the fine type of honorable business man who has built up his success by virtue of the excellence of his products and square dealing, and who was more frequently met a couple of decades ago than in this age. Haney was the type who forces his way to the top by bulldozing and unscrupulous conduct. Garver would rather lose business than sacrifice his self respect by a dishonorable action. Haney would get the money anyway so long as he could keep out of jail.

"Well, Mr. Cornell," said Garver courteously, "it looks as if the Continental Heating company would have to resort to bribery to get a much-desired contract, doesn't it? I dislike to do it, very much, but it is extremely necessary that we get this school contract. I am sorry to have to pay a bribe to unscrupulous politicians. I would not do so except to beat a company that wants to put an inferior heating plant into our schools. I have a large amount of pride in my own city, Mr. Cornell, and I want to get my heating plant—which is a good honest one—into the schools. I am afraid we will have to appease certain politicians with a good-sized bribe before this can be accomplished."

"Oh, I guess not," I said. "We'll get this letter writer for you after that your politicians won't bother you."

Garver smiled.

"I admire confidence, Mr. Cornell," he said. "But Mr. Haney informs me that this thing is sewed up too close for comfort. The local ring already is negotiating with the Blank Heating

Company of New York. Mr. Haney has had their treasurer, Mr. Carlin, watched, and a certain young man named Blake, who is a clerk in the New York office of one of our local politicians, has been with him constantly. They are the people who want to put the inferior plant in our schools, and through this envy the politicians are in close touch with them. Isn't that the situation, Mr. Haney?"

"Yes sir," said Haney. "This young fellow has been hanging around Carlin for the last few weeks, so it's a cinch they've got something framed up. The politicians are trying to make us overbid the other people's bribe."

"How much will the bribe be?" I asked.

"Mr. Haney informs me that it will take \$10,000," replied Garver.

"Oh!" said I to myself. "Mr. Haney informs you, does he? I begin to see a little ray of light."

"I still say," said I to Garver, "that we will have your letter writer in a few days and that you won't have to bribe your politicians."

And out of the corner of my eye I saw Haney smile.

The next two days were busy ones for me and for Cluffer and Doheny of the Burns agency staff. I went back to New York; Cluffer and Doheny on my wired request came rushing to the place I had been working. Cluffer knew the ins and outs of the political ring in that city like a book. He had worked on a couple of city hall cases there. Doheny had been brought up in the town and was chummy with half a dozen of the most powerful politicians of the lower class, the kind who would be in on such a deal as the school heating contracts.

For two days Cluffer and Doheny combed the political corners of the town. They smoked and drank and chummed with everybody they needed in their business, from the king of the levee district, who was the biggest politician there, to the little hangers-on of husky ward-healers. Then they sprang their proposition.

winter time. The air gets bad, as I understand.

"Now, as I say, we've been in on every piece of city money that's been spent; but about this one—well, some of us have got kids of our own, and we says, says we: 'Let's let the kids get decent air and heat;' and we said: 'Hands off the heating contracts. Let the people with the best plant get the job, and nothing doing for us.' I'm sorry, but we've decided to let that job go clean."

Cluffer wired me in New York what he had found. It was what I had hoped and expected, because my theory pointed that way.

In the meantime I had gone straight to Blake. He had seen me in the office when he came in with his anonymous letters three months before.

"Are you getting any of those letters nowadays?" I said.

He was fidgety, and he lied and said, no.

"Then why are you associating with Carlin so much lately?" I asked.

"How do you know I am?" he demanded.

"The man who wrote you the letters told me so," I said.

His curiosity overcame him.

"Who is he?" he said. "Do you know, I'm worried half to death over the thing. It's perfectly crazy to me. Here a month ago the letters began coming again, and a twenty-dollar bill in each one, and a promise that they'd continue if I'd only hang around Carlin a lot. 'Let yourself be seen with him,' was the expression. What in the deuce does it mean?"

"Easy enough," I said. "You work in the New York office of a man who's big in politics in this other city where the letters are mailed, don't you?"

"Yes."

"And Carlin's in the heating business, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"And there's a big heating contract to be let in this other city. And the politicians there always have been notorious for grafting on every sort

Blake had received were in the same hand that had penned the ones that came to the Continental Heating company. They were in a peculiar hand. After studying it for a while I saw that it was the looping, continuous hand of a telegrapher. But it wasn't a good telegrapher's hand; the letters were just a trifle shaky.

"Easy," I said to myself. "Find a telegrapher who's on the toboggan from drink or dope."

I went back to the city where the letters had been mailed, the city where the fight was on, and called on the heads of the local telegraph company and showed them the handwriting and asked if any such man worked for them.

He didn't. They had fired him for drunkenness several months before. He was an old expert named Handy who had gone the whisky route.

When you have a man identified to that extent it isn't hard to find him. Some of the old telegraphers in the office knew the particular lodging house where Handy was living. He had touched them at intervals for small loans.

Cluffer and I went to the lodging house and found Handy in bed, recovering from a terrible spree.

"I want you to write some letters for me, the same kind you've been writing for my friend Haney, of the Continental Heating company," I said.

"Get me a drink, for God's sake," said the wreck. "I haven't got a cent."

I got him something to steady his nerves and set him to work. He wrote enough to show me positively that he was my man.

"How did Haney happen to get you to write his letters for him?" I asked.

"Oh, I used to know Haney before the booze got me," he said. "I went up to his office and tried to touch him. He told me he'd pay me for writing some letters for him, and I wrote them for him and mailed 'em, too, as he ordered. Ain't any trouble about it, is there?"

## Man and the Bird

Man's conquest of space by heavier-than-air machines and his difficulties in controlling his mechanisms in varying currents and eddies have naturally aroused interest in the doings of his most easily-studied prototypes—the birds. Although a bird is far better equipped than a man, even in the most perfect and powerful flying machine yet invented, to cope with swirling gusts and sudden blasts, few feathered creatures care to fly during a storm.

Drexel says: "The aeroplane has its limitations, and they are so far very narrow ones." If this be true of the mechanical power, what of the guiding intelligence behind it? writes Richard Kerton in The Sphere. Man has to conceive a situation and communicate his will through his limbs to his mechanism, whereas a bird instinctively throws its will into its wings and tail, which is a much shorter path to results.

Now let us glance for a moment at the relative speeds of mental perception in a man and a bird. For a long series of years I have undergone a severe training in quick mental perception and at the crucial moment setting rapidly-answering mechanical contrivances in motion, and have no hesitation in stating that the powers of the most alert human being when compared with those of a bird are as the speed of a snail to that of a Derby winner. Some idea of a bird's marvelous rapidity of perception and resultant action may be gained when I state that I have exposed dozens of photographic plates with my focal-plane index showing that I was working at a speed of the 200th part of a second before I secured a picture of a crested tit on a branch near its nesting hole. Even in such a short space of time the bird was able to conceive the sound and set its wings in motion before the shutter of the camera closed.

No Flights in Rough Weather.

Now if such a wonderfully-equipped creature as a bird finds a difficulty in flying in strong currents and eddies, how much greater must these same difficulties be for the airman. Everybody has seen large flocks of starlings going through their astonishing aerial evolutions before retiring to rest for the night and marveled at the skill with which they avoided colliding with each other whilst wheeling, twisting and swooping. This illustrates the extreme rapidity of their mental perception and its translation into action, but in spite of these very useful qualifications the birds do not risk such exhibition displays of flight during very stormy weather. Members of a pack of grouse flushed during a gale of wind have been known to collide and kill each other in mid-air.

I remember on one occasion putting a grouse up near to a stone wall during very gusty weather. The bird had not proceeded far before it was caught by a terrific side blast and hurled against the wall. Falling to the ground it rose again, but instead of attempting to continue its flight parallel with the fence, took a course at right angles to it, and by a series of vigorous wing beats forced its way straight up into the eye of the wind, and then, turning right around, sailed away over the wall on outstretched wings. Grouse, like seagulls, appear to be able to read the signs of a coming storm, and frequently seek shelter before the breaking of the blast. I have known them to leave the exposed hilltops and descend even to the meadows right at the bottom of a Yorkshire dale before the oncoming of an exceptionally heavy gale accompanied by hail and rain.

Island Birds in a Hurricane.

Some years ago whilst in the outer Hebrides I noticed thousands of seagulls of different species sitting quite still in a pasture close to the Atlantic. Every head was turned toward the sea, from which a moderate breeze was blowing. By the middle of the afternoon the wind had increased to such hurricane force that pieces of foam as large as a man's head were being carried from the beach a quarter of a mile inland, and not a bird of any kind was to be seen on the wing. Anxious to see how my feathered friends were faring during such exceptional weather I struggled forth, sometimes progressing on my feet, and at others, in exposed places, on my hands and knees. I found common terns sheltering behind boulders at a considerable distance from the shore. Arriving at a vertical hole some 70 feet in diameter and 50 feet in depth in the roof of a long sea cave, I was astonished to discover a peregrine falcon sitting in the company of about 40 rock doves. The storm had actually made the lion lie down with the lambs. There was a great clatter of wings as the terrified birds rose from their place of shelter. The peregrine was carried down wind like a piece of paper and soon disappeared from sight, but the pigeons battled on their strong wings until I had retreated a little way, and all dived into the hole once more.

How much birds dislike windy weather may be gathered from their silence and lack of activity during a rough day in June. Whilst no bird likes to fly in a strong following wind on account of the liability of have its feathers ruffled, heavy-bodied short-winged species, such as ducks, appreciate a strong breeze in which to rise from the ground or water because of the increased resistance it affords.



"And out of the corner of my eye I saw Haney smile"

"We've got a cheap heating proposition we want to get into the schools," Cluffer told the big politician. "We know that we can't compete with the other firms that are bidding on the jobs; our plant won't stand competition—it isn't in their class. But we're right. Understand? We're ready to come through big on this proposition. You and your friends can get as nice a piece of change as you've seen in a dog's age if you'll see that we get that contract, and nothing said about the kind of plants we put in."

The big fellow crossed his hands over his stomach and said:

"Now, I tell you, my boy, it's like this about those school contracts. We've made it a habit here—me and the other fellows who control the votes—to have our finger in every bit of city money that's been spent for the last ten years. We've been in on it all. But about this school business, y' know, we got to thinking about it and the first thing we knew we discovered that the health of the little kids who go to school depends a whole lot upon the heating and ventilation system that goes into the rooms. They get all sorts of things the matter with them if the heat ain't right in the

city contract, haven't they? Well, then: here you are, working for one of the politicians, and there Carlin is, in the heating business. Now, if you've seen a lot with Carlin wouldn't anybody who knew it decide that you were the go-between for the politician you work for and Carlin, the heating contractor?"

"Perhaps," he said. "But darn it, man, I'm not. I haven't said a word to Carlin; I haven't been asked to. There's nothing in it, man, nothing but the appearances."

"And that's just what your friend who sends you the twenties is after," said I. "He wants the appearances to be just what they are."

"But I'm not guilty of anything wrong."

"Certainly not, my boy; but you come pretty near being an innocent tool."

"But who's the man who sent me the letters?" asked Blake.

"Oh," I said, "I don't think you need to know. But I promise you this: you won't get any more letters or twenties, and you can stop being seen so much with Carlin."

And, in the meantime, I had been studying the letters. The ones that

"Oh, no," I said. "Not for you."

I went to Mr. Garver and saw him at his home that night and placed my evidence before him. It took me four mortal hours to convince him that his manager, Haney, had simply put up a bluff about the politicians wanting to hold up the firm that got the school heating contracts. I had to send Cluffer and Doheny after the levee king and bring him up to Garver's house and get him to tell the story about how the crooked politicians had decided to let the heating contracts alone. But when I had him convinced he was convinced all over.

The case never went to court. Garver didn't want any news that would mention the name of his town even indirectly in a graft scandal to get before the public. But the manner in which he threw Haney out of his job broke that crook's nerve. Garver let other people in the heating business know about Haney's awful crookedness, and Haney became a man shunned. He tried to make another start, but his reputation had become too black. He dropped down little by little, and not long ago one of our men saw him in the same lodging house that still held his old friend Handy.