

The New Secret Service of the United States

Judson C Welliver

Table of Contents

<u>The New Secret Service of the United States</u>	1
<u>Judson C Welliver</u>	2

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SEVERAL months ago a great railway bridge which spanned one of the boundary rivers between the United States and Canada was seriously damaged by the explosion of a huge charge of dynamite.

Not many hours later a roughly dressed man was found in the woods on the American side and arrested on suspicion. Under examination he confessed. Yes, he had blown up the bridge. He was willing to admit it. He was a most engagingly frank person, this dynamiter who had tried to put an international railway trunk line out of business, and had been perfectly willing to wreck trains and kill scores of people in doing it.

The story of this crime, of the over-willing confession of the perpetrator, and of the subsequent procedure by which the Secret Service men learned the facts that finally enabled them to send the criminal to prison gives a particularly graphic illustration of the difficulties with which the service has to grapple.

The prisoner declared that he was a reserve officer of the German army, and insisted that he had committed, on Canadian soil, an act of war against Canada, in the interest of his own country. He denied that he had committed any crime whatever, and particularly denied that he had in any way offended against the peace, dignity, or laws of the United States. On his theory, he was merely a soldier who had been making war against the British Empire, and had escaped to American territory. Being captured there, he was entitled to be regarded, not as a common criminal, but as a soldier subject to internment by the neutral government of the United States.

The Canadian railways, he argued, were carrying both war supplies and soldiers from the interior to the Atlantic seaboard, and anything that would hinder their operation, and perhaps destroy some of these necessities of war, would be a service to Germany.

He had concluded, therefore, to conduct a one-man invasion of Canada and, if possible, to blow up a railroad bridge where it would do the most damage to the country's transportation system. He said that he had no particular difficulty in getting into Canada. He left the train at the first station on the Canadian side and walked back along the track toward the international boundary. It had been arranged in advance, according to his tale, that between the railway-station and the bridge-head he would meet an Irishman carrying a suitcase. As they approached each other he was to address the Irishman:

"Hello, Tommy!"

"Hello yourself," Tommy was to reply.

Thereupon Tommy was to turn over the suit-case to the reservist and disappear into the woods. In the suit-case was eighty-five pounds of dynamite, with fuses and other necessary paraphernalia for exploding it.

All this, according to the "confession" of the dynamiter, took place precisely as had been arranged. He received the bag of explosives and infernal mechanism from Tommy, walked out on the bridge, placed the dynamite, and set the fuse, being careful to keep on the Canadian side of the boundary-line. Then, he said, he went on across the bridge to the American side, and disappeared into the forest, having planned to walk to a village several miles away, where he thought he could appear without exciting suspicion and escape on a train.

It was a particularly well-organized and attractive story. The Secret Service men were not satisfied with it, but through many hours of questioning and cross-questioning they failed to lead the prisoner into any substantial modification of his narrative. What they wanted was to prove that he had committed an offense against the laws of the United States.

The most palpable flaw in his story was its introduction of the mysterious Tommy. This particular yarn was of a type with which the Secret Service people were thoroughly familiar; and they early concluded that Tommy was a fiction introduced in order to account for the dynamiter's possession of the explosives. They believed that he had, in fact, brought the suit-case full of dynamite with him from the United States; and if this were true there was a chance to prosecute him for the statutory crime of transporting explosives on a train carrying passengers.

Having made up their minds that this was the correct theory, the officers set about to find evidence supporting

The New Secret Service of the United States

it. They were helped by the fact that the prisoner had made a curious mistake in framing his plans. When arrested he was arrayed in the costume of a working man. A description of the costume and of the prisoner was furnished to the railroad authorities of every line that might have brought him from New York. Conductors, porters, ticket-agents, and employees generally were questioned as to whether they had seen the man, when he had ridden on any of the trains, and what baggage he carried.

This drag-net very quickly brought the desired information. The man had left New York carrying a heavy suit-case, and had traveled by way of Boston in one of the best trains of the New Haven Railroad. On that train, because his rough clothing was incongruous with his mode of travel, he had been noted and remarked upon by both officials and fellow passengers.

With this information in their possession, the officers were still unable to complete their case against him, because, while they were morally certain that he had carried the explosives with him from New York, nobody had actually seen the inside of his suit-case. The prisoner still clung to the story of the mysterious Tommy, and it was very doubtful whether a jury could be induced to convict him in the face of his own seemingly frank and circumstantial narrative; so a ruse was resorted to for the purpose of breaking down his story and getting a real confession instead of a bogus one.

This part of the story illustrates how the skilled operators of the Secret Service work to get information from unwilling witnesses. The officials do not attempt any "third degree" method of forcing confessions. It has been found too frequently that statements thus extorted are likely to be worthless. Instead, the effort is made to discover some sentimental trait in the prisoner's character, through which he can be led, in spite of himself, to tell the truth.

During their repeated conversations with the dynamiter the investigators had discovered that he was particularly proud of his status as a German army officer. He had referred more than once to the honor of his profession, and had strenuously insisted that he had acted as a soldier, not as a criminal.

Accordingly, one of the detectives sat down with him and took his dictation of the confession on which he stood. It was written out with the utmost care, and he was permitted to correct and sign it.

Then came the appeal which broke down the entire fabrication. Having signed the statement, the prisoner handed it across the table to the Secret Service man who had helped prepare it. The latter picked it up, hesitated a few moments, and then, producing a fountain pen, wrote, immediately following the prisoner's signature:

I certify that the foregoing is a true and complete statement, on my honor as a gentleman and an officer of the German army.

With this addendum, the memorandum was passed back to the prisoner,

"Now," said the investigator, "just accommodate me by signing that, and this part of our business will be finished."

The prisoner picked up the memorandum and eyed it with some curiosity. He read the addendum. Then he turned back to the beginning of the statement and perused it with a new care and interest. He turned it over in his hands several times, and read it once more. Finally he laid it down on the table, smiled grimly at his vis-a-vis, and slowly shook his head.

The Secret Service man took out his watch, glanced at it a little impatiently, as if the delay was annoying, and said:

"Well?"

"I guess I can't sign that," admitted the prisoner lugubriously.

"What's the matter with it? You've already signed it once."

The prisoner shook his head again, this time more decisively.

"No, I can't sign that."

"But why not?" persisted the investigator.

"Tommy!"

Nothing more was said for a full minute, the two men watching each other closely. Then the official spoke:

"You don't care to declare, on your honor as a gentleman and an officer of the German army, that there was any Tommy in the case?"

The prisoner burst into a hearty laugh.

"Well," he said, "anyhow, I've got those Canadians up there still looking for Tommy! No, there wasn't any Tommy."

The New Secret Service of the United States

The government had perfected its case. On the trial it was proved that the dynamiter had calmly walked through the Grand Central Station in New York carrying nearly one hundred pounds of dynamite in his bag, bought his railroad ticket, climbed into a Pullman car, chucked his bagful of destruction under a lower berth, and himself scrambled into the upper berth.

The prisoner testified, with some evidences of gleeful satisfaction, that he enjoyed an excellent night's sleep. Perhaps the man in the lower berth would not have done so well if he had known all about his traveling companion; his testimony is not at hand.

This little story has been told because it illustrates the methods employed by the Secret Service. The good, old-fashioned, dime-novel methods of heroic sleuths who are pictured carrying young arsenals on their persons and doing lightning-change acts with wigs and false mustaches, are not being affected now in the best circles of Secret Service society. An old-school detective of the Nick Carter type would be about as useful and appropriate in the organization of the present Secret Service as a forty-two-centimeter gun at a peace parliament. They aren't doing it that way nowadays.

It is perhaps not generally known that there are now two distinct branches of the United States Secret Service. The older branch has been in existence for many years, and is a division of the Treasury Department, commissioned to prevent counterfeiting and to investigate one or two other classes of offenses, such as fraudulent bounty claims. Prior to 1908 this was the only detective agency of the government. The Department of justice, though charged with the prosecution of criminal cases, had no means of investigation save inquiries by district attorneys and Federal grand juries.

On request of a district attorney, it was customary for the Secret Service to loan operatives to the Department of justice to make a particular investigation. In cases involving violation of the national banking laws, the department would borrow the services of national bank examiners, who were experts in banking and accounting methods, to help secure evidence of illegal acts. But in general there was no organized bureau or service designed for general use in detecting violations of Federal laws.

Early in 1908 the charge was made in Congress that Secret Service operatives had been employed to inquire into the conduct of members of Congress. This caused much indignation, and, as a result, there was inserted in one of the appropriation bills of that year a proviso that thereafter the Secret Service of the Treasury Department should be employed only for enforcement of the laws against counterfeiting and for the protection of the President, and in no other way whatever; also that no Secret Service officer should be paid from any other than the regular Secret Service appropriation. This meant that the other government departments were not to be permitted thereafter to borrow investigators from the Treasury.

These restrictions on the established Secret Service made it necessary for the Department of justice to equip itself with some sort of investigating instrumentality of its own, which could be used to secure evidence in land-fraud, revenue, peonage, and other classes of cases. At that time the department had a corps of attorney examiners, as they were called, and this corps was expanded into the Bureau of Investigation of the Department of justice, which is now the general Secret Service of the United States. The bureau was organized with a force of thirty or forty men, and Stanley W. Finch, who had been chief examiner of the department, was placed at its head.

Mr. Finch was not afflicted with any lurid notions about the spectacular aspects of a detective organization. He engaged good, bright, clever lawyers, accountants, bank experts, and a number of the veteran operatives who had been discharged from the old Secret Service of the Treasury Department when its field of activity was circumscribed by the proviso that has been explained.

The present head of the service is A. Bruce Bielaski, a young man who entered official life as a laborer in the Department of Justice, worked his way through law school by studying out of business hours, demonstrated a peculiar capacity for the business of investigation, was assigned to this bureau, and in a remarkably short time rose to be its chief.

Mr. Bielaski would be more likely to be taken for a clergyman than for a detective. He conducts his service on the simple and rather obvious theory that the best way to get information is to go to the people who have it, and ask them for it. Sometimes they will frankly disclose it. Sometimes they will try to conceal it, but will tell more than they intend or realize. Sometimes they will try to suppress things which the investigators know they could tell if they chose; and that is one of the most unwise things a man can do when the representatives of Uncle Sam ask him for information.

The New Secret Service of the United States

It is the experience of the Secret Service people that when a crime has been done it is commonly useless to attempt shadowing people who are suspected. Instead, it is found more effective to hunt up people who have played minor parts in the criminal transaction, usually without knowing the significance of what they were doing. The Secret Service man goes to such a person, frankly explains what he wants to know, and asks for information.

There is no buncombe, no effort at disguising the matter in hand, no attempt to gain the confidence of the person who is being questioned by employing misrepresentations. Instead, he is advised that his own interest is to be perfectly frank with the government and to help it.

In nearly all cases this procedure is effective. A Secret Service man of long experience and intimate understanding of human nature declares that most people are pretty persistent liars about every-day affairs, but that very few of them will attempt lying when an officer asks for information. They prefer to tell the truth, in the hope that it will keep them out of embarrassing complications. More-over, despite their proneness to lie, most people do it very badly, and the man who attempts it usually confounds himself early in the game.

Crimes against the Federal laws almost invariably involve a considerable number of people. This does not necessarily mean a large or elaborate conspiracy; but it does mean that there must be a pretty widely extended net of circumstances in which a good many people are involved, most of whom play unwitting parts that give them information the significance of which they are likely not to understand.

Persons in this position are likely to be very willing witnesses, because of their desire to make plain that they are entirely innocent. Thus the officers, starting at the margin of the net of circumstances, are able to unravel it bit by bit, increasing their knowledge as they travel inward toward the real malefactors at the center.

It is frequently found useful to know all about the character and antecedents of a person before he is questioned, because this knowledge frequently indicates the method of most effective appeal. How many detectives of the old-fashioned Nick Carter school would have realized, for instance, the value of appealing to the honor of an officer and a gentleman in order to get a bridge dynamiter to confess?

One of the commonest and most effective ways of tracing criminals is by watching the mails. A bank teller disappears from his home town, and it is discovered that he has looted the bank. There may be absolutely no clue to his whereabouts, but it is almost certain that before very long he will write to somebody—to his family or his friends. The circle of intimates to whose discretion he could be expected thus to trust himself is necessarily small and easily conjectured.

Even in cases of this kind it is not permitted to open first-class mail; but the post-office authorities cooperate with the service officials in tracing the courses of mail when proper request is made. The missing banker will, of course, write in a disguised hand, and perhaps will also have an arrangement for relaying his mail; but the officers are perfectly familiar with all these methods.

When a suspected letter is reported, it is traced back to the point of origin. Before long it is possible to determine whether that point is a relay point, and, if so who is the person to whom the fugitive is sending communications. After this the unraveling of the scheme is commonly rather a simple affair.

Another very useful means of detecting criminals is through the records that telegraph and telephone corporations keep of their messages and calls. If some friend in a bad scrape calls you on the long-distance phone, or sends you a mysterious message, you are likely to be surprised at the promptness with which an insinuating gentleman from the Secret Service will call on you and urge you to explain the circumstances. Likewise, you probably will be surprised at the desire which will suddenly seize you to give him all possible information. You will want the insinuating gentleman distinctly to understand that you are not helping a criminal to escape.

It is almost an invariable rule not to attempt any deception of the person from whom information is desired. Experience has proved that when an investigator tries to fool a witness the witness generally succeeds in fooling him. Perfect straight-forwardness is generally the effective method.

It is part of the policy of the Bureau of Investigation not to let it be known how many people are actually in its service. The officials admit that there is not much point to this bit of mystery, because anybody can read the appropriation bill passed by Congress, which provides the money, and can see that the present appropriation is half a million dollars per annum from which to pay both the salaries and expenses of the employees. Manifestly, it cannot be a very large personnel that attempts to cover the whole country at such an expense.

Since the passage of the so-called White Slave Act, the enforcement of which is under this service, a good

The New Secret Service of the United States

many local police officers have been engaged on a fee basis to assist the work of the Federal officials. These men are enlisted with a view to getting the best possible knowledge from such centers as railroad–stations, hotels, and the like.

The Bureau of Investigation has grown rapidly since its establishment, and is likely to grow still faster in the near future, because of the importance of its work in connection with plots against the neutrality of the United States. There has always been a profound prejudice among Americans against anything like a system of espionage, and there is not the least danger that anything like the systems maintained in certain European countries will ever develop here. No Congress would pass a law providing for any such intimate scheme of watching and card–indexing people as is in vogue in countries like Russia and Germany.

There, of course, close espionage is justified by the government's fears of revolutionary plots and military spying in the interest of hostile neighbors. In our own country we have possibly gone to an extreme in protecting individual liberty in these regards.

An alien may come to the United States, map our harbors, make charts of fortifications, and generally familiarize himself with anything of possible interest, without any fear of apprehension and punishment, simply because there is no law to prevent such things. Again, offenses against American neutrality, by the means of blowing up industrial establishments, dynamiting railway bridges, and the like, are offenses against the State in which they are committed, rather than against the United States.

There is thus presented a difficult and anomalous situation. The Federal government possesses the only means with which to combat such attacks, and yet has no law under which to prosecute them.

The need of more direct and efficient laws to empower the Federal authorities to deal with new classes of offenses is coming to be generally recognized, and it is believed these will be passed without much delay. But nobody imagines that any general espionage system will ever be attempted in the United States. There is no need for it, and, except under stress of great and imminent national peril, the public would never consent to it.

[The end]