PERILS OF PETROSINO

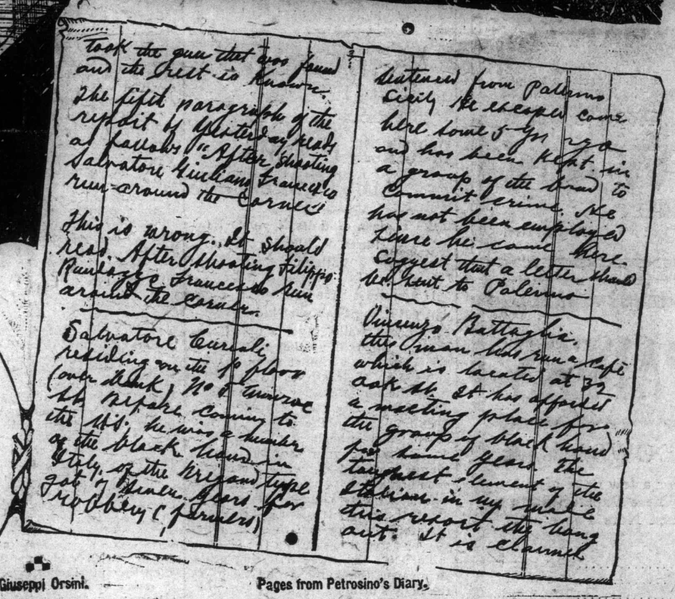
Maria Abigniole, Who Shot Giuseppi Orsini.
Photo by Sol Young.

HE AGREED TO GO TO THE TRYSTING PLACE THAT NIGHT WHILE DETECTIVES SHOULD BE IN HIDING NEARBY.

J. NORMAN LYND.

Antonio Cincotti. Antonio Nistano.

Giuseppi Orsini.



Pages from Petrosino's Diary.

The Price of Immunity

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VICTIMS who have been once caught in the toils of the Black Hand are held for all time as though wrapped in the coils of a monster serpent. Immunity? There is none, for once tribute has been paid the victim has for all time placed himself in the power of those who levy it and from then on he is made to do the bidding of his masters, or else continue to pay until the last cent has been wrung from his little savings.

Those who have studied the growth of the Black Hand in the United States have dwelt at length on the pathetic case of Francesco Spinella, who after years of toil and thrift amassed a little fortune of $30,000. Hounded by threats of the Mano Nera, he resisted to the end. His tenants were threatened and bomb after bomb was exploded in the hallways of the tenements he owned, until he found it impossible to keep a tenant in the ill-fated houses. It was not long until Spinella had been stripped of his fortune and once more was compelled to return to manual labor in order to provide food for his family.

But Spinella is not an exception by any means. He is but one of many who, possessing the temerity to stand out against the demands of the blackmailers, were either stripped of their fortunes or were finally made to flee for their lives.

There are many Italians in New York city who after building up well paying little businesses were approached by Black Handers with demands for exorbitant sums. Declining to pay, these small merchants held out as long as they could, and then, realizing that resistance was futile, not only handed over the price demanded but, to guard against future extortion, agreed to give the agent who called on them a share in the profits of the business, this share to be paid over at the end of each week. In consequence there are perhaps still living in the Italian quarters of New York city scores of bomb tossers and cutthroats whose sole occupation each week is to walk around and keep an eye on the business that is being transacted in the little shops in which they have been given a share. They know just how much cash is taken in and they are inexorable when the day for settlement arrives.

Not only have these little merchants signed away their very lives, but in reality they have allied themselves so closely with the blackmailing group to which they pay stated sums at regular intervals that in order to lighten their own burdens they act as informers, or "stools" for their tormentors. They keep a close watch on the Italian colony of which they are a part. They know every newcomer who moves into their circle and they make it a point to ascertain his financial standing. If his business prospers they tell the collector who calls on them, and he, in turn, focusses his attention on the newcomer as a possible victim.

If this newcomer embarks in a business that encroaches upon that of the first victim the latter sees to it that the Black Hand gets busy and drives the interloper from the field. This accounts for the far-reaching effect of the Black Hand, and, further, it accentuates the secrecy of the organization; for often persons who at first were innocent victims become sooner or later, through force of circumstances, just as active and as voracious as the ones who originally tormented and blackmailed them.

Thus the shop of the little grocer who is forced to pay over a share of his profits becomes the real clearing house for the Black Handers operating in that vicinity. Their ears are kept close to the ground and every scrap of information bearing on the intimate affairs of those living near by is picked up and duly retailed to the leaders of that group. Future actions depend upon the usefulness of this little grocer. If he keeps faith with Mano Nera and tells all he knows in time he is permitted to share in the ill gotten gains that the loungers in his grocery extort. But at no time is his business immune from the Black Hand's levy. That share must be forthcoming, for the moment he defaults he is made to pay the penalty of all traitors and some business rival is installed in his place.

Should he decline to give up and move to some other part of the city his enemies follow him. No sooner does he set up shop elsewhere than they appear with the demand.—"Pay up or shut up." Nine times out of ten he pays, for he sees that flight is useless.

In the files kept by Joseph Petrosino, the martyred detective for years head of the Italian squad which did such effective work in New York city, there is a voluminous list of names, including Black Hand agents and collectors and their victims, as well as the sums demanded from each of the victims. Many of the names of victims appearing on this list are those of highly respected Italian merchants who, when asked if they still pay their weekly tribute, vehemently protest that they have never had any dealings with the Black Hand. If dragged into court they would unblushingly swear to this effect, yet Petrosino knew, as do those who are continuing his work know, that these men are part and parcel of the great army of the Black Hand which is increasing at an alarming rate.

Detectives Micelli and Corrao, who are still conducting a relentless crusade against Italian criminals in New York city, in discussing Black Hand methods with me a few days ago summed it up in this wise:—

"The Black Hand will continue to flourish in New York city just so long as the persons singled out for extortion submit to it. If nine-tenths of these victims living here would join issue and flatly decline to pay and at the same time come straight to us with these written demands or tell us who made them in person we could clean up the situation in a very few months.

"But the trouble is these victims, going upon the principle that half a loaf is better than none, pay up like little sheep being led to slaughter. Then, in order to get 'even'—for you know misery loves company—they submit names of other well to do merchants to their tormentors and see to it that they, too, are made to pay.

"Consequence is this blackmailing system is fast resolving itself into an endless chain, for with different groups operating in every Italian quarter in the city you can see how far reaching it is becoming.

"Unless the Italian squad is reorganized on its old lines, and in a very short time, we will have a big task before us when we do get down to our real clean-up work."

The detectives then cited the case of Antonio Cassese, a bomb victim who was driven out of business about a year ago, long after "Joe" Petrosino was so cowardly murdered in the streets of Palermo by Black Hand agents. Cassese conducted a moving picture theatre in Grand street and with his wife and baby occupied rooms over the theatre. For six months Cassese was bombarded with letters demanding $1,000. To these he gave no heed, at first believing he was the victim of a practical joker. He did not become alarmed until he received a letter notifying him that unless the money was paid at once the baby of the Cassesses would be kidnapped and held until the money was forthcoming. This letter gave Mrs. Cassese such a shock that she urged her husband to do what he could to safeguard their child.

Six months after the receipt of the first letter Cassese's nephew was kidnapped. The Black Handers stole the child in the belief that he was Cassese's son, and upon discovering their mistake the boy was released. But they duly notified Cassese that such an error could not occur a second time. Then came threats against the life of Cassese and his wife and baby, and to accentuate these the theatre owner was fired at several times by agents of the Black Hand, who waylaid him as he was leaving his theatre late at night. It would have been an easy matter to kill him outright, but the Black Handers wanted the money, and this they intended to get, in no matter what fashion.

In all the communications addressed to Cassese he was warned against communicating with the police. "If you do the life of your child will be the forfeit," was the concluding sentence of each of these highly ornate epistles, for not only was the smudgy imprint of the Black Hand prominently displayed on the stationery, but the skull and crossbones appeared as well.

Immediately after the kidnapping incident Cassese was told to wrap $1,000 in bills of small denomination in a newspaper and go to Canal street and the Bowery, where a twelve-year-old boy would greet him with a pleasant "good morning." He was then to hand the boy the package of money and disappear as speedily as possible. If he failed to comply with this demand he would soon be shot to death, added the writer, and the wife and baby as well would be killed.

On the advice of Detective Micelli, Cassese wrapped some money in a newspaper and started for the trysting place. Micelli and other detectives, disguised as pushcart men, were near by scrutinizing Cassese and all who loitered near or passed. Evidently the cunning blackmailers had learned through some of their many underground channels that Cassese was in the hands of the police, for no boy appeared to greet him. That night as one of Cassese's employes was leaving the theatre a man halted him, saying, "How about that boss of yours? When is he coming across with that $1,000? Tell him we mean business."

The employe seized the man, but a blow on his head from the butt of a revolver stretched him on the sidewalk and his assailant fled. The police were acquainted with the identity of this man, but he managed to prove an alibi when arrested and arraigned.

Three months after this episode—many letters coming to Cassese in the interim—his business was wiped out by a firebrand that nearly cost the lives of Cassese and his wife and child. Cassese fell asleep early that night, having been worn out by the many nights of vigil spent at his window with a gun resting in his lap. He had fully determined to shoot at any suspicious person he might see approaching the theatre after he had closed it for the night.

While standing in the foyer of his little theatre early that evening the sight of two men whispering together led him to believe that an attack was to be made upon him that night. When he closed the theatre he took the night's receipts of $125 to his wife on the third floor and told her he had business downtown which might detain him several hours. He urged her to quiet the baby and get to sleep as soon as she could. Cassese then descended to the theatre and with a shotgun resting in his lap took up his vigil in a seat near the Grand street entrance.

For two hours he was awake and alert. Then, overcome with weariness, he dropped to sleep. Shortly after four o'clock a policeman passing saw flames flaring from the rear of the theatre. As he rapped on the door Cassese was aroused in time to see the whole of the stage afire. A bomb had been tossed in a rear window. Evidently it was defective, for instead of exploding it sputtered fire, which ignited the inflammable material about the rear of the theatre, and before the firemen could arrive the whole structure was a furnace.

Cassese's first thought was for his wife and baby. He was nearly frantic when he found all approach to the upper floors had been cut off, as the stairway was ablaze and portions of it already had fallen in. The firemen had seen the frantic mother with her baby in her arms as she stood at a third floor window. This glimpse of the mother they got as they came speeding through Grand street. Mrs. Cassese then climbed out to the fire escape and those below implored her to descend to the street. None could understand why she failed to do so. Closer examination showed that the drop ladder leading from the second to the first floor had either been wired fast to the landing above, or else bolted so that all escape by this means was impossible. The flames were billowing out of the second story window, literally scorching the face of the terror stricken mother, when the firemen by means of scaling ladders reached her and carried her and the child to the street.

Cassese had resisted the Black Hand to the bitter end, to find that the threats of the blackmailers had been made good. He had lost all his possessions.

One of the sidelights on the Spinella blackmailing case has to do with a young woman tricked by a member of the Black Hand band. She took the law into her own hands and in her own way meted out justice to the man who betrayed her. In one of the many letters Spinella received he had been ordered to deliver a package of money at a barber shop kept by one Abagniali, in East Fourteenth street. Two detectives, disguised, were being shaved in the shop when the messenger bearing the marked bills arrived. When the money was handed over the detectives leaped from their chairs and arrested every one in the shop.

As the detectives were leaving the premises with their prisoners they saw approaching a young man who, they learned later, was Giuseppe Orsini, a close friend of Abagniali. Petrosino discovered that Orsini had been paying ardent court to Maria Abagniali, a sister of the barber. Orsini was shadowed for a long time, but the detectives were unable to connect him with the band of extortioners.

Orsini continued his attentions to Maria and on November 16, 1910, he took her to the City Hall and procured a marriage license. That afternoon a mock ceremony was performed and Orsini and "his bride" went to live at No. 356 East Twelfth street. They lived together for several weeks, when Orsini deserted the girl and legally married Louisa Vallardi. Maria then returned to her old home, at No. 210 First avenue.

One afternoon Maria lay in wait for Orsini in East Twelfth street, and as he arrived at the entrance to No. 314 Maria stepped from behind the stoop and fired three shots into Orsini's body. She dropped her pistol and calmly walked to her rooms in First avenue, where she prepared and ate her supper and sat quietly awaiting the police. There the detectives found her, and without the least hesitation the girl admitted the shooting. As it was thought Orsini was dying, the girl was taken to his bedside in the hospital, so that the victim might identify his assailant.

As the girl approached the bedside Orsini coolly looked at her and turning to the police said:—"Why did you bring this woman here? She did not shoot me and had nothing to do with it."

Maria was astounded at this and addressing the stricken man said:—"Well Giuseppe, if I didn't shoot will you please tell me who did? In any event I hope you die, you dog."

Orsini hovered between life and death for many weeks. Maria was held pending his recovery and when placed on trial was discharged because Orsini still stoutly denied that she had shot him. An all round bad man and consort of Black Hand operatives, Orsini on this occasion manifested the only spark of chivalry that he had ever permitted to creep into his sordid life. Less than a year after his recovery he was arrested while lurking in the doorway of Maria Abagniali's home. The police believe that he was there to seek the vengeance he had wrested from the hands of the law by his refusal to identify the girl as the one who shot him. He was arrested and convicted of carrying concealed weapons.