

PERILS OF PETROSINO

By A. R. Parkhurst, Jr.

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NO history of that fiendish, devilish and sinister band of blackmailers and assassins grouped under the banner of "The Black Hand" is complete without a chapter devoted to the tireless and heroic efforts of Joseph Petrosino.

It was the New York detective whose life was the forfeit for his patriotism and loyalty to the country of his adoption.

Taking his life into his hands was a almost daily occurrence with this martyr, and it was due greatly to his efforts that the New York Police Department stands pre-eminent in the war on that band of cutthroats and bomb throwers that has operated with such dire results in the big and little cities of the New World.

To the majority of the members of the New York Police Department credit will always be given "Joe" Petrosino as the master mind in the great fight against the Black Hand.

It is his records compiled and preserved by "Joe" Petrosino, which bear among the mass of papers in the files of the work of the greatest policeman, and treasured by the police as he left behind, that I purpose to write the series of articles treating of the Black Hand and the part the Italian squad under Petrosino's direction played in combating it.

His Murder Unavenged.
"Joe" Petrosino was born in Pádus, in the province of Campania, fifty-two years ago. It was on the evening of March 12, 1906, that he was so foully murdered in the Piazza Marina, in Palermo. That murder to-day stands as a signal victory for the Black Hand, and to the shame of the United States and Italy it is still unavenged.

Petrosino's father, a tailor, emigrated to New York with his family in the early seventies of the last century. At that time Mulberry Bend was the Mecca for the two or three thousand Italians living in New York city, and there the Petrosinos took up their abode. At that time the Irish far outnumbered the Italians in this section of the city, and many bitter battles were fought between the sons of the rival aliens. "Joe" bore his part in these conflicts and from the first demonstrated that his fists were all the weapons he needed in fighting his way through the Public School No. 23, at Bayard and Mulberry streets, where he received his early education. In those days the rivalry between the Irish and Italian children was so keen and the former so far outnumbered the latter that the Italian children never dared to leave the school for their homes except in groups.

The boy Petrosino, conveying a flock of little ones of his own nationality was prophetic of the future, for his manhood was devoted to shielding honest patriots from the ever increasing demands and depredations of the Camorra and the Mafia.

By selling newspapers in the streets and blacking boots "Joe" was able to add to the slender purse of the Petrosino family and in his spare moments practised on his beloved violin. Music was a passion with the boy, and when fourteen years old, with several youths of his own age, he made a tour of the Southern cities as an itinerant street musician. It was the boy's dream to so perfect himself on the violin that he might procure a position in a theatre orchestra, but he had neither the time nor money to do so. Realizing he must increase his earnings in order to help out materially at home, Joe went to work for a butcher. He later was employed in an Italian bank and still later as a timekeeper for an Italian squad working for a railroad contractor. At this time the streets of New York were cleaned under the supervision of the Police Department and young Petrosino obtained a position as overseer of one of the dumping piers at the North River.

He Becomes a Policeman.
Here his earnest work attracted the attention of Police Captain Williams, then known as "the Tsar of the Tenderloin." Williams, deeply impressed by the young Italian's resolute manner, fine physique, clear eye and head, suggested that he become a policeman. Joe was not impressed with the idea at first, and it was a year before Captain Williams' persuasions bore fruit and Joe donned a uniform. The young man made just the ideal policeman that Williams predicted he would, and for twenty-five years he went about his duties in a conscientious and painstaking manner, with the result that never a black mark was registered against him. Joe had no influential friends at court and in those days advancement only came through "pull." It was ten years before the young Italian "copper," disliked by the Irish contingent, which dominated the department, won his first advancement to the grade of roundsman. Exceptionally clever work brought him still another promotion four years later, when he attained the chevrons of a sergeant, which in those days corresponded to the rank of the lieutenant of to-day. He was assigned to the Detective Bureau and in that department achieved an international reputation.

While his work as a detective from the very first was of the highest order and proved that he was the most useful and resourceful man in the bureau, international fame did not come to Petrosino until the last ten years of his life, and this through his relentless warfare on the Black Hand.



The early efforts of Petrosino as a detective were confined to the bands of Italian confidence men who infested the steamship piers and preyed upon fellow countrymen homeward bound. Petrosino sent 133 of these sharpers to Sing Sing. He, single handed, uncovered the prime leaders in the "resurrection frauds," which called for tireless and exceptionally clever detective work. With every lawless Italian operating in the United States his sworn enemy Petrosino circled about them, and found alive and well scores of men who had been pronounced "dead" in order to collect the money for which they had been insured.

His success in detecting crime among his fellow countrymen soon attracted the attention of the United States Secret Service Bureau, and to him many federal detectives appealed. He unearthed the band of counterfeiters who were coining spurious United States money in Naples and shipping it to the United States for circulation. Many of the counterfeiters were arrested and sent to Sing Sing.

Petrosino, and since his discovery of the completion of their terms, he has done so many more have been apprehended and turned to prison by Williams J. Fitzgibbon. One of the most daring pieces of detective work ever accomplished by Petrosino was his discovery of the plot to assassinate President McKinley. The

President of the United States. It was further added that the Continental "reds" had insisted that the scheme would be materially aided should the Chief Executive of this country be the first to pay the forfeit. Panic reigned in Washington for a time when it was discovered that there was not a man among the operatives well enough qualified to go and live among the anarchists in this country and bring from them the inner secrets of their clan.

Following an appeal to the New York Police Department, Petrosino was the man assigned to the work, and accordingly he took up his residence in Paterson, N. J., at that time a hotbed of anarchism. He soon ingratiated himself with the leaders of the "reds" and joined their secret societies, all the while picking up information that substantiated his gravest fears as to the desperate nature

of the men he was associating with. Had his identity been suspected for a moment his life would not have been worth a penny, for they would have murdered him in his tracks. Fortunately for him he was not so widely known at that time, for had this assignment come to him two years later he could not have fraternized with these men an hour before his identity would have been discovered. Every foreign criminal coming to this country was warned to familiarize himself with Petrosino's features the moment he landed here or else his freedom would be short lived.

As a result of Petrosino's sojourn in Paterson he unearthed the plot to assassinate President McKinley. He hurried to Washington and laid his information before the authorities there and pleaded that the guard about the President be doubled, that under no circumstances

should he expose himself unnecessarily to danger and above all to keep clear of crowds. When he heard that the President contemplated visiting the Pan-American Exposition at Buffalo, Petrosino repeated his warning and urged that Mr. McKinley abandon that portion of his programme which included holding a public reception in the Temple of Music.

The afternoon President McKinley was shot by Czolgosz Petrosino was standing on the steps of old Police Headquarters chatting with a number of fellow detectives. A newboy scampered by shouting "Hurry! Hurry! All about the President being shot!" Petrosino scanned the headlines and, bursting into tears, said:—"Oh, I told them to be careful. Why did they let that man go to his death when they knew the 'reds' had sworn to get him!"

Petrosino was rarely emotional, despite his high strung and sensitive temperament, and to see this ordinarily taciturn and fearless man weeping as copiously and hysterically as a woman came as a revelation to his comrades, one of them saying afterward that Petrosino did not recover from the shock the little newboy had so unconsciously administered for months afterward.

But in dealing with the Black Hand Petrosino found conditions entirely different from those that govern the anarchists. This great band of criminals is not a definite organization, with officers, board of directors and bylaws and constitution. Instead it is a floating body, composed of a myriad of smaller

agencies whose units are ever changing, increasing or decreasing as the nature of the crime in contemplation demands. Sometimes these groups include as many as two score plotters, while at other times they shrink down to three or four operators, and in some instances to a single individual. Yet always the deed is done according to formula. The leaders of the Black Hand are invariably men who hold their leadership by virtue of capacity, and are likely to vary with separate ventures.

The title for the hands engaged in crimes of this nature was probably first employed by a Sicilian bandit who had heard of the exploits of a band of Spanish brigands and anarchists who had styled themselves "The Black Hand." As the crimes of this Sicilian and those who banded themselves under his leadership became more frequent and more rapacious attendant publicity naturally followed, until the newspapers took up the hue and cry of the police and made the appellation fit all crimes, such as murder and blackmail, in which Italians figured as the principals.

In the first four years of his stay in the detective bureau Petrosino spent his days and nights among fellow countrymen, always cleverly disguised and endeavoring to be alert to pick up information dealing with the depredations of the cold blooded criminals he was trailing. Italians driven to the United States by the activity of the police in their native land came in hordes, and conditions were ripe for flooding the land of hope and promise with as daring and secretive a band of cutthroats as ever escaped the gallows. The majority of these had emigrated from Southern Italy, Naples, Sicily and Calabria, all of whom were already cognizant of the operations of the Camorra and Mafia, and, furthermore, would submit to any form of torture be-

fore they would appeal to the police for protection. All knew that any such appeal would lead to their death, and accordingly all, or nearly all, considered themselves bound by the "omertà," or conspiracy of silence, which bars any appeal for police aid.

When New York awoke to the real peril confronting her Italian citizens Chief Magistrate McAdoo conceived the idea of forming an Italian squad of detectives and Petrosino was selected to head it. This was in 1904, and that squad did valiant service until the day of Petrosino's death. For reasons known only to himself Commissioner Woods abolished it, but Commissioner Woods already has started to reorganize it, and it is expected that the work so long undone will speedily be resumed and men who worked with Petrosino will be placed in charge of the various subdivisions.

He Was a Model Policeman.
Hundreds of instances could be cited to prove the daring, courage and high minded integrity of "Joe" Petrosino. With never a single blemish on his record as the model policeman of the New York department. What he achieved has never been equaled by any other detective, and many of these achievements are regarded as mere routine, modestly retaining from giving them that publicity which the average policeman so ardently courts and which would have served to establish the reputation of any one of them had they been so fortunate as to have figured as the detective in the case.

Though he was a devout man none ever heard this chief of the Italian Bureau discuss religion. His best friends assert, however, that he never sallied forth on an especially perilous mission or appeared in court to testify in a Black Hand case but that he first visited his priest and received absolution. His fellows in the Italian squad are a mit in declaring that "Joe" could have made a million in graft had he chosen.

The best proof of his sterling honesty is the financial condition of the young wife, who learned of her husband's tragic death as her firstborn nestled at her breast. Mrs. Petrosino was not left penniless, for "Joe" had no extravagances and never dissipated, but there was barely enough to keep the wolf from her door until the Legislature passed the bill introduced by the late Senator "Tim" Sullivan providing her with a pension of \$2,000 a year.

With such an enviable record made in his pursuit of criminals in this country it seemed a ruthless trick of fate that designated him the man who must go to the heart of the Camorristic lair and confer with the Italian authorities as to the best means of checking Black Hand depredations in the United States. Foreign criminals, due to lax laws at American ports of entry, had been flocking to the United States in droves, and even when apprehended the frames of statutes at Washington had been so remiss in their duties that it was almost impossible to bring about their deportation.

The Department of Commerce and Labor had never awakened to the menace of Black Hand operatives and these arch conspirators and blackmailers came and went at will. Since Federal aid was not to be relied upon Commissioner Biagham, after exhaustive correspondence with Italian police heads, decided that the best means of checking these depredations would be to send a trusted emissary to Italy where he at first hand could pick up the criminal records of many Italians then in the United States. With these facts at hand it was believed that scores could be deported before they had the opportunity of launching upon fresh careers of crime.

He Insisted Upon Going.
Fully realizing how hazardous such a mission was and at the same time appreciating Petrosino's unparalleled worth to the department, General Bingham did not care to have his Italian squad leader take such a risk. But Petrosino argued that inasmuch as he was the man who had led the fight against Italian criminals he would not shirk in the face of danger and under no circumstances should a substitute be sent. Every care and precaution was taken to keep the contemplated mission a secret and orders were given that not a line should creep into the newspapers about Petrosino's European trip. This order, however, was disregarded and the contemplated voyage of the Italian detective was heralded in a New York newspaper.

Arriving in Rome, Petrosino presented his credentials to Ambassador Griscom, and armed with other papers he set out on his search for the records of criminals who had sought refuge in the United States. His journeys through Italy and the manner in which his footsteps were dogged have been dwelt on at length in the many accounts published of his stay in Italy. From Rome he proceeded to Palermo, where his presence in the office of the American Consul threw that official into a state of panic, knowing as he did how eagerly the death of the great detective was sought by the Mafia, whose stronghold was in that city.

To the consternation of those who knew of the mission of Petrosino to Palermo, the detective and a companion left Petrosino's lodgings house and proceeded in the direction of the Piazza Marino. As they turned into the beautiful piazza, according to a sailor, the lone witness to the tragedy, Petrosino's companion abruptly turned and left him. At that instant several shots, fired from the detective's rear, rang out, and Joe Petrosino sank to the sidewalk, mortally wounded.

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