
The Pinkertons

by Eugene V. Debs

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We do not expect by writing of the Pinkertons to extend the area of their notoriety. If we can in any degree aid our readers in forming even an approximately just conception of them, we shall feel amply compensated for the task.

As we understand it, there are two departments of Pinkertonism — the “detective” and the “protective,” so called. Under the influence of our much vaunted civilization, crime, in what is known as the “upper crust” [...] of society, has, during the last few decades, alarmingly increased. There are a vast number of honest-minded men who never tire of telling the world that the sublimation of human nature must come through the influences exerted by the school and the church, and certainly there ought to be no objection to the proposition. Education and religion ought to exert an elevating influence, and such is doubtless the case, but the fact remains nevertheless, that in circles distinguished for intellectual culture and devotion to religious teachings, are found the Napoleons of crime. Take the army of boodlers in all of our great cities, and they will be found to average well in matters of education and literary standing, but when we are required to contemplate the multitude of bank and railroad wreckers, insurance plunderers, the defaulters, embezzlers, and thieves whose operations are upon a large scale, they will be found, in almost every instance, to be men of large educational attainments, often graduates of colleges, and in a majority of cases, “pillars” in some one of the orthodox churches. When any of these gilded, colossal scoundrels engage in crime, they go for all that is in sight. The stake is always immense. They shake down fortunes as earthquakes do buildings, and being educated, they are able to cover up their tracks, necessitating the work of expert detectives. Under such circumstances, Pinkerton, the father of the Pinkertons, was carried into business life and prominence. He had a nose for detective work. To put him or his trained

men on the track of a thief, a defaulter, an embezzler, or a boodler, promised good results, and as educated criminals multiplied, Pinkertonism thrived. It fed and grew fat on crime, and as in every great American city crime of the character we have named increased, Pinkertons multiplied.

Those who take the time to study and analyze social problems, whether of virtue or vice, will discover many startling facts well calculated to create anxiety if not alarm. They will find society in all the large cities corrupt to an extent as almost to defy exaggeration. Mr. James Parton, the historian, in a paper published not long since, in speaking of matters moral and criminal in the city of New York, says:

For forty years past the aldermen have been little but a gang of thieves. As a body they have done scarcely anything but steal. As a rule they were elected for nothing else, sought their seats for nothing else, and nearly every act done by them has had in it some taint of iniquity.¹

Here we have the statement that the very foundation of the government of the great American metropolis is contaminated by crime, a festering mass of pollution, an aggregation of infamy. Not in the ranks of the poor, the working people, but of the officials, the Government itself. In such a Sodomized community Pinkertonism decks itself in purple and fine linen. The government is the dog, and the Pinkertons are the fleas in the hair of the dog. In such a community as Parton describes, is it a matter of surprise that the knights of the jimmy are on the alert to secure their share of the boodle, that sneak thieves and footpads increase in number and boldness? And what is true of New York is equally true, measured by population and opportunity, in all of the great centers of population in the country, and hence, as a consequence, we hear of the Pinkerton detective agencies in all of the great cities.

While some of the educated and pious scoundrels engage in robbing banks and insurance companies, in wrecking railroads and watering stocks, cornering the food products of the country to make it more difficult for poor men to get bread and meat, another set of scoundrels engage in concocting schemes whereby they can impose additional burdens upon workingmen. The detective agencies of the

¹ James Parton, "Outgrown City Government," *The Forum*, vol. 2, no. 6 (Feb. 1887), pg. 544.

Pinkertons may be well enough for aught we know, or care. The old aphorism, "set a thief to catch a thief," doubtless holds good in the present as in the past, but we come now to speak of another department of Pinkertonism, a later development, and one which merits and receives from workingmen universal detestation. We refer to what is known as the "protective department."

We have referred to the fact that taking their cue from that numerous class of high-toned criminals who rob and wreck by wholesale, certain corporations, like the CB&Q, seek to increase their dividends by robbing their employees, a system of robbery in all regards more odious and atrocious than that of robbing a bank. The men who rob workingmen of their honest wages, who seek to deprive them of the necessities and comforts of life, are men whom it were a compliment to call villains. They are the enemies of humanity, the creators of hunger pangs, the promoters of poverty, the distributors of rags and the disturbers of the peace of society. It has so happened in the past that their cruel injustice to workingmen has been productive of labor troubles, ultimating in strikes. American workingmen have said, "we can no longer endure your injustice. Your piracy upon our lives is a wickedness to which we shall not longer submit," and they as a last resort strike. This done, what happens? A call is made upon the "Pinkerton protective agency," and as if by magic, the city swarms with Pinkertons, armed with Winchester rifles and pistols, clothed with authority to shoot down workingmen with or without provocation.

Who are these bloodthirsty, murderous Pinkertons? What of their character? What of their antecedents? Only God and the Pinkerton agency know. They come as carrion crows come to a carcass. They go as bloodhounds go into the chase. They are gangs of mercenaries who are suddenly clothed with power to kill workingmen. They are beetle-browed ruffians, who have no more regard for the welfare of society than would be accorded to the same number of vagabond dogs. They are the skimmings of the filth of the slums, and yet these miscreants, uniformed and armed by the "agency," are sent forth to kill, as to their brutal natures may seem proper. The list of cold-blooded murders these wretches have perpetrated horrifies all right-thinking men, and has earned for them an eternal night of ignominy.

But, after all, where rests the supreme burden of blame, of censure and infamy for armed Pinkertons, when workingmen in the grasp of corporative cussedness, demand justice? When in slave times the

bloodhounds were put in pursuit of the slave fleeing for liberty, who thought of denouncing the hounds? The men who put the hounds on the track of the fugitive were responsible for the blood-curdling horrors of the chase and the capture. The Pinkertons who go forth with shotted rifles and pistols to kill workingmen, have in a large degree the instinct and nature of hounds, but behind these human monsters are other monsters still more inhuman, who are responsible for the damnable business. Who are they? Well, they are creatures put into power largely by the votes of workingmen, and when workingmen federate for the purpose of electing honest men to office the Pinkertons will disappear, and not till then. The workingmen of the great cities, once united, they can have humane officials and humane laws. When may the world anticipate the dawn of the new era? When shall the sleek, rotund scoundrels who plot the degradation of labor, and commission cutthroats to slay workingmen for protesting against savagery and slavery combined, have the power wrested from their unholy grasp? It will be when workingmen, comprehending their rights and prerogatives and using the ballot for their weapon, transform city governments from Augean stables into seats of cleanliness, represented by justice and righteousness.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport

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