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Wanted Man

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I AM STANDING at a photocopier in the Library of Congress, scanning the room. The readers sit hunched over documents, pencil in hand. Nobody is interested in what anyone else is doing. Each is locked into his or her own world and time. There are no briefcases or bags, diaries or mobile phones. The personal clutter that connects us to the outside world has been taken away at the door, to be stowed in a locker until we leave. We may have arrived with a laptop or a leaky ballpoint, but now we each have only a pencil, some lined paper and a numbered locker key. I am number thirty-five.

One of my fellow researchers protested that he felt like a new inmate being admitted to prison. I have to confess that I quite like it. It's liberating and reassuring all at once, almost a return to childhood, or my childhood at least, when someone else held the keys and the purse strings, leaving me free to play. Here you don't have to worry about losing anything except, perhaps, a sense of time.

But today security is on my mind. On the ceiling small video cameras are fixed at regular intervals. I try to work out what areas they cover.

I hope I look calmer than I feel. How do I do this? Do I 'accidentally'

drop the photograph on the floor with some other papers, then palm it into my trouser pocket? If I keep close to the photocopier it may work. But what if they search your pockets when you leave?

I didn't check because, when I walked into the library, I had absolutely no intention of stealing. I was a respectable academic on her way to view a newly donated archive. Barely twenty minutes later, I'm contemplating theft and my body is telling me that this isn't idle day-dreaming. My heart is beating fast, my palms are sweating. Then, just as I realize that the clichés are true, I know that I won't do it.

I finish my photocopying, return the documents to the librarian, reclaim my belongings and leave. As I pass through security at the main entrance I notice they don't check pockets.

Half an hour later, I'm sitting in a café, despondent, as if I've failed a test. I hadn't wanted to steal a unique manuscript or even a rare book, just a cheaply produced nineteenth-century tintype photograph. And it probably wouldn't have been missed. There were a dozen others in the folder where I found it. The archive was not yet catalogued, and I had been allowed access as a special favour. Why had I stopped? Was it fear of being caught? Or of what I would do with the photograph if I got away with it?

It wouldn't have been my first theft, although it would only have been my second. As a child I stole an eraser from the village shop as a dare, egged on by bolder girls. It wasn't the eraser I wanted, of course, but their approval. When I got home, I was so racked with guilt that I buried it in the part of the garden we called the wilderness. I felt hot flashes of shame every time I entered the shop, and whenever I saw those girls. I had passed the initiation test, but I would never be part of the 'gang'. Now, although I had never wanted a material object as much as I wanted the photograph, my nerve had failed.

I first saw the photograph in a 1950s coffee-table book about the Wild West. Since childhood, I have had a special relationship with the American West. Like many children who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s, I believed the world of cowboys and indians, ranchers and outlaws was not only real but current. Forty years ago, every other television programme seemed to be a Western, and the world of *The Virginian* appeared every bit as real as the English countryside. It seemed a place of safety, its moral certitudes as snug as its log cabins and wigwams. I moved on to *The High Chaparral*, and later, with my friends, debated the relative charms of Hannibal Heyes and Kid Curry. Our adolescent West was wilder, freer and full of passionate possibilities. Men on horseback rode through our dreams as, we were sure, they would one day ride into our lives.

I had a special connection. The characters from films and television were figures in my own family history, as real to me as my grandparents. And I was sure that I too would one day live in this world of legendary men and women. While my friends tried to gallop bareback and carved 'Pete Duel RIP' into their desks, I dreamed about what I was sure was my own manifest destiny. My father, nearly sixty when I was born, was raised on a farm in Cornwall, but the stories he told me at bedtime transported me to a more alluring family home. In the late nineteenth century, many of the Spargo men had gone west to America to seek their fortune. A cousin found a new life as one of the 'muckrakers', writers who exposed the suffering and corruption beneath the gilded surface of American society. An uncle worked as a carpenter for Buffalo Bill and stayed in the New York hotel run by Colonel Tom Thumb. The kitchen table on which I wrote my homework was made by a man who had built a shooting range for Annie Oakley. My own grandfather worked in a

hospital in New York where he met Sitting Bull, before returning to Cornwall to raise cattle and a family.

As I grew up, so did my passion for the West. I rushed to the cinema to see *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *Willie Boy*, even *Little Big Man*, and scanned the shelves of second-hand bookshops for faded coffee-table books about the world of chuck-wagons. I knew, deep down, that my West was mythical, that when Uncle William worked for Buffalo Bill, he was building the scenery for a dream. But myths, and dreams, when we believe in them, even with our fingers crossed, do shape our lives. What I was looking for in the history of the West was not the truth, but a way back to the lost world of possibilities – of security, of freedom and of passion – of my own childhood.

Many books on the West are full of photographs: formal portraits of lawmen, mug shots of convicts, and chilling pictures of dead outlaws held up for the camera by their killers. In most, the eyes of the living men and women seem as dead as the deceased. They gaze into a middle distance, for ever out of our reach. But there are exceptions. The man in the photograph I wanted is one.

His collar is slightly too tight and his hair roughly cropped. He is unshaven, his face is bruised, and although his eyes seem troubled, one corner of his mouth is lifting towards a smile. Although the photograph was taken over a hundred years ago, he looks shockingly modern. He looks alive. His name is Oliver Curtis Perry and from the moment I first saw his face, I was in the grip of a powerful obsession that was not in the least academic. I wanted his picture not for my files but for my bedside.

When I saw Oliver Perry's photograph, I fell, unknowingly, for a doubly wanted man. The photograph was originally carried in the pocket of Pinkerton detectives in a nationwide manhunt. To

those who wanted to bring him to justice, he was a remarkable, ruthless criminal, but to many of his fellow Americans he was a romantic, daring outlaw. This man occupied the dreams and fantasies of a generation.

I was only the latest in a long line of women, and men, who had fallen for Oliver Perry. Yet today, apart from sketches of brief moments in his life, he is a forgotten man, his story lost. What drew so many people to him in his lifetime? Was it the same challenging, wounded look that compelled me so long after his death? And why, unlike other outlaws, has he been almost completely excised from history?

Years after I stopped believing that I would ride off into the sunset with an outlaw lover, I had found myself face to face with him. The photograph transported me from my adult world of history into an adolescent romance, and I wanted it like young girls want pictures of their film-star idols. When my nerve failed, I found myself back in the real world, alone.

Because he was an outlaw and I was an academic, stealing his photograph would have somehow connected us. Leaving it in the folder felt like a betrayal, a confirmation that we were separated by more than time.

I kept tracking him across New York State and beyond, in detective agency archives, in prison records and newspapers of his day, even unearthing his own writings, unread since his death. With his photograph always in my head, if not my pocket, I proved a better detective than I would be a thief.

In the end I discovered a man of greater complexity and power than the handsome outlaw I had been hunting. I found many clues to his appeal to the men and women of his day. I also found out the terrible reason why he had been forgotten.


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CHAPTER 1

Wild Western Ways in the Empire State

IN MARCH 1929 the thirty-first President of the United States of America, Herbert Hoover, proclaimed: 'Ours is a land rich in resources; stimulating in its glorious beauty; filled with millions of happy homes; blessed with comfort and opportunity. In no nation are the institutions of progress more advanced. In no nation are the fruits of accomplishment more secure.' Just a few months later, the stock market crashed and the happy nation sank into depression and despair. In the hard years that followed people would do almost anything to get by. On city streets men, women and children queued for handouts and picked through garbage to find food.

The city of Utica in central New York State's Mohawk valley was as hard hit as any other. Once-booming businesses closed or laid off most of their workers. Many Uticans who had come from other lands, or from the surrounding countryside, searching for a better life, moved on once more, in search now simply of work. Some turned hobo, travelling along the railroad lines, risking the wrath of the 'bulls' employed to keep the trains free of passengers who would not or could not pay. An optimistic few, remembering tales from their childhood, searched for better fortune nearer home.

Stories had been told about fantastic wealth, a robber's horde, buried in the Frankfort Hills, just outside the city, forty years before. So, armed with shovels and picks, Utica's Depression dreamers headed into the hills to dig. None succeeded, but their attempts to strike it rich in a world with no other hope echoed the actions of the man whose treasure they were seeking. Like them, he had hoped that one lucky break would transform his life of misfortune.

In the aftermath of the Civil War that convulsed the nation in the 1860s, America had entered an era of extraordinary economic growth. The technology of war, as ever, propelled the peacetime nation into a new age in which memories of loss mingled with hopes of gain. Steel, oil, copper, and the railroads needed to transport them, transformed the United States into one of the world's top three industrial powers. They also turned wartime speculators and profiteers into a new commercial aristocracy – J. Pierpont Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, Cornelius Vanderbilt, August Belmont – whose empires were centred on the Empire State. In New York City alone there were over a thousand millionaires by the 1890s. Their success seemed to be the ultimate fulfilment of an American dream, but real life for most Americans was in stark contrast.

Workers endured harsh, dangerous conditions, poor pay and no job security in industries that were almost entirely unregulated. Safety measures and decent wages were costly and, in a fiercely competitive free market, profit ruled. Exploited workers, in the mines and on the railroads, turned to desperate measures. Their strikes were, in turn, violently suppressed by hired strike breakers. Beneath the gilded surface of the age something very much like class war was simmering. Among the immigrants who

arrived daily from the Old World were radicals, socialists and anarchists, determined, in different ways, to forge a better society. Their arguments found a growing working-class audience. Middle-class liberals, meanwhile, feared that the great industrialists were corrupting the system by routinely manipulating politicians for their own ends. In some circles a new name was found for them: 'the robber barons'.

In this competitive world, the fantasy of making it big fuelled a million schemes that fed on people's dreams. Every day a golden new business opportunity was advertised to take the citizen's dollar. Some were stranger than others. In Portland, Oregon a stock company was established to breed black domestic cats for fur. The company announced that an island would be purchased so that the stock could be isolated from other cats and live on fish. Prospective investors were assured that there were millions to be made in cats. For every dollar there was a waiting speculator. The spirit of the age was distilled by one commentator: 'Get money – honestly if you can, but at any rate get money!'

In New York State the post-war era had brought dramatic change. More and more people kept flooding into the state but the competition from more fertile agricultural lands in the west hit the upstate farmers hard. Rural workers soon began to give up and move to the towns to work in factories and mills. The booming cities of New York State were full of men and women, native-born and immigrant, who had grown up in close-knit communities but were now among strangers.

The landscape of the state still shows the effects of the industrial boom. The railroad travels north from New York City through the Hudson valley, then west along the Mohawk valley from Albany to Utica, and beyond to Rochester and Buffalo,

tracing the ancient ways of the great rivers and the more recent routes of the industrial era. Cities are strung along the twin highways of water and rail, some named prosaically for their business, like Gloversville, others, like Amsterdam and Geneva, recalling the homes left behind by waves of immigrants. Still others speak of heroic identifications. The Empire State, even in its most mundane places, is overlaid with names from a classical mythology: Troy, Rome and Utica.

In 1891 Utica was a city of some standing, with new electric lights shining out across the dark surrounding hills. It was also the place where one of the most daring crimes in New York's history took place.

Late in the night of 29 September 1891 the New York Central 'American Express Special' set out from the state capital Albany on its long journey. The train, known to railroad buffs as 'the hottest of hotshots', travelled at top speed and carried no passengers. It was a vital link in the economic chain that connected businesses in the east and west of the nation, stopping to pick up freight along a route that finally led to Chicago. Like any freight train it was made up of cars owned by different companies. One of these was special. Outside, it looked just like any other, a wooden wagon with a solid door at each end and sliding panel doors with windows in the sides. But this was no ordinary freight car, carrying tinned goods or leather shoes.

It was owned by the American Express Company and was known by railroad workers as the 'money' car. It carried specie or cash from the United States Treasury for western banks, as well as bonds, jewellery and other valuables. Inside it was divided by crossways partitions into three compartments. In the central one, which held all the valuables in four large safes and numerous

sacks, travelled an American Express employee called, innocuously enough, a 'messenger'. His job was to deal with all the paperwork for the company, but he was also an armed guard. The American Express Special, as it was popularly known, was reported to carry loads worth up to a million dollars.

Few messengers expected to use their regulation revolvers, on the eastern leg of the journey at least. Robberies had been a hazard in the wilder west since the first recorded train robbery in 1865. These were violent crimes, with trains derailed or blown apart and trainmen forced to defend their basic livelihoods with their lives. The names of the western outlaw gangs, Reno, James, Younger, were already legendary. Their methods were brutal but their origins in civil war conflict attracted the sympathy of some ex-Confederates and many romantics. A few radicals believed they were no more ruthless than the respectable 'robber barons' of the east. Men who made money fast, legally or illegally, inevitably did so at someone else's expense. Was a fast, bloody death in a western street or on a railroad track so much worse than a lifetime of dangerous drudgery in a factory or on a train? Whatever their thoughts about the comparative morality of bosses and outlaws, most easterners were relieved to know that daring train robbers belonged in another world, far away from 'civilized' New York.

But that September night everything changed. 'Wild Western Ways in the Empire State' declared the *New York Herald* the following morning, while Joseph Pulitzer's *The World* seemed geographically affronted: 'A train held up right in the heart of the Empire State! And this on one of the most frequented roads in the Union – the New York Central! It seems almost incredible that such wild Western methods could be successfully practised in the

centre of civilization without a trace being left as to the perpetrators of such a daring deed; yet such is a fact.'

The American Express Special was speeding though the 'burnt stone' canyon, a few miles east of the bright lights of Utica, when it suddenly ground to a halt. The trainmen, who travelled in the last car, jumped down to investigate and found that someone had cut through the air-brake hose at the rear of the money car. Inside they found Burt Moore, the messenger, dazed and gasping, 'I've been robbed.' The robbers had apparently disappeared in the pitch darkness of the canyon. Unable to see well enough to give chase, the crew travelled on to Utica to report the crime.

There the shocked messenger explained what had happened. He was working in the central section, with the end doors locked. The front partition door was open to make room for the freight, and sacks and parcels were piled high against the front car door because it would not be used on the journey. When the train approached Frankfort, he was crouched with his back to this door, checking the waybills that identified the sender, destination and recipient of all the freight. The train was travelling at full speed, engine roaring and cars clattering over the switches. Once or twice he thought he heard something and looked around but everything seemed in order, and his revolver was near at hand, on top of a trunk.

Suddenly he heard a louder noise, turned and saw a man pointing two guns at him. His face was completely covered by a red hood, except for slots through which his eyes flashed. 'It's money I'm after,' he shouted. 'Quick, we're getting near to Utica!'

Moore claimed that before he could react, a shot whistled past him, and the robber grabbed his revolver. The masked man made him unlock a safe, then emptied it, tossing aside bags of jewellery,

and stuffed half a dozen canvas bags into a large bag he carried over his shoulder. Keeping his guns trained on Moore, he moved slowly towards the side door and opened it as if to jump. But the train was travelling too fast and he changed his mind, backing towards the front door. Slowly, he felt his way back through the piles of packages and, keeping one gun stretched in front, dropped the bag through a square hole in the door, then wriggled, one foot at a time, back through the hole and dropped out of sight. Moore assumed that he had swung down to cut the brake hose that ran underneath the cars, to stop the train and make his escape. Whatever he did, he disappeared without trace.

The car itself told the story of how the robber had entered it. Standing on the platform as the train sped noisily through the night, he had bored a small hole in the front door, to spy on the messenger, then made four more holes lower down, and sawn out a panel, about fifteen inches square. Then he had leaned through, pulled out a box to stand on, squeezed into the car and surprised the messenger. It was a devastatingly simple plan, brilliantly executed. Unlike his western predecessors, this man had worked alone, and had used skill rather than brute force. He had also chosen to rob a train in the busiest state in the Union.

The police immediately cabled American Express and the railroad company. The robbery was a real embarrassment to both – and a threat to future profits. They swiftly announced that the train had been carrying an unusually small amount of money, less than $20,000 in total, and that mostly bonds. While all those interviewed, including New York Central Railroad President Chauncy M. Depew, acknowledged it was ‘a queer case’, they immediately insisted that little could have been stolen. American Express announced that the robber had stolen less than $1,000,

and one official, stretching credulity to breaking-point, argued that it was only $150. Newsmen were sceptical. One consulted an Albany banker who confirmed the general view that the train was more likely to have carried at least $100,000.

American Express lost no time in employing the Pinkerton Detective Agency to find the robber. The agency had, like the corporations it now worked for, been 'made' by the Civil War, when its agents worked undercover for the Union side, and was known for getting results by any means necessary. Now the 'Pinks', under the direction of Robert Pinkerton himself and the agency's New York manager, George Bangs, assembled in Utica. There they joined a throng of railroad detectives, local police and newsmen and started the painstaking process of searching the surrounding towns, villages and countryside. It was the biggest manhunt upstate New York had seen for many years.

The Pinkertons had years of experience in dealing with train robberies in the west, where a network of detectives, local sheriffs and informers had given them real success. But this was a challenge. The man they were after was clearly no ordinary robber. George Bangs, a man not easily impressed, wrote to William Pinkerton, 'The man who committed the train robbery here is one of the nerviest I ever heard of. There are few if any men who possess the daredevil courage to accomplish what this train robber did yesterday.' And as the days passed no trace of the robber came to light, nor any clue to his identity.

Then, five days after the crime, a couple of local men made an important discovery while picking ink-berries in Borden's Grove. This was a patch of scrubland near an abandoned distillery, some three miles east of Utica. They were about to call it a day and go

home, when they spotted a lot of torn paper on the ground. On closer inspection, the paper turned out to be wrappers from money and bonds. Nearby were empty money envelopes, packages and jewellery boxes as well as large cotton bags with the marking 'Am. Ex. Co.'. Among the papers they found a waybill listing 'three diamond rings' and an envelope marked '$5,000'.

They bundled everything up and went to find a local reporter who immediately set off on the trail of the robber. Just behind the place where the wrappings had been found was a deep, overgrown ravine that ran south from the canal into the Frankfort Hills. Full of stubby trees and bushes, it offered ideal hiding places. The reporter drove along the road until he found what he was looking for: someone who had a story to tell.

Erving Vance, a farmer, was not an ideal witness. Until an apparently miraculous but mysterious 'cure', he had been totally blind. His sight had been only partially restored, however, and he had to rely on his ten-year-old son to help him on the farm. On the evening after the robbery, he had gone out to bring a horse into the barn for the night, taking his son with him. As he approached the barn he saw an object looming in the semi-darkness and assumed it was the horse, but the object said, 'Good evening.' 'Well, what do you want?' Vance had replied, startled. The stranger had answered that he was looking for Mr Rider's place. 'Holmes Rider?' asked the farmer. 'Yes,' came the answer.

Suspicious of anyone prowling around his farm, Vance had asked who he was. According to the farmer, at this point the man started to behave as if he was slightly drunk. He said he had been drinking with two friends, had fallen asleep on the road, and woken to find they had gone. As far as Vance could make out, the

man had said his name was Stevens or Stevenson, and he came from Little Falls, but had worked in Amsterdam for a time before that. He had seemed increasingly uneasy and anxious to leave. Told the way to Rider's farm, he started off in another direction until Vance called out. After some hesitation he changed his path and the farmer and son, who knew nothing about the train robbery, watched him disappear into the darkness.

Vance gave the reporter a description that, although lacking in detail because of his impaired vision, matched that of the train robber given by Burt Moore: about five feet nine, of rather slight build, with a small dark moustache. His son confirmed his story and other sightings followed. A bee hunter remembered seeing a man who kept his face hidden and who, if a local barber was to be believed, made his way back to Utica that evening, walked into the barber's shop and asked to have his moustache shaved off. The man's clothes, the barber said, were dusty and covered with 'stick tights' or burrs, and he clutched a newspaper-covered parcel. He had paid from a 'good roll of bills' and left. After that the trail went cold. But the reporter's search had uncovered two things about the robber. The fact that he had named a local farmer suggested that the robber might be a local man. The fact that he had coolly walked back into Utica, under the detectives' noses, confident that he would not be identified, showed that he was as daring as a wanted man as he had been as a robber.

The Borden's Grove find had also proved something else: that whatever American Express said, this had been a major robbery. Someone leaked the fact to a reporter that four more canvas bags and their contents had not been accounted for and the remaining empty bags were soon found on top of an eastbound freight car near Albany. Whatever the official line, the growing band of

newspapermen in Utica knew they were on to a real story and the public were eager for the latest chapter.

If American Express was under pressure, the crew of the robbed train had reason to feel even more uncomfortable. Many people insisted that the robber must have had inside knowledge or help, and the police were searching for one suspect, an escaped convict, just because he had been a railroad worker. The most worried man was messenger Burt Moore. Although he had been in shock after the robbery, he had not been hurt. To some observers this was deeply suspicious. He was a powerfully built man who did not appear to have put up much of a fight. It was also rumoured that no evidence could be found that any shot had been fired in the car. Possibly Moore had invented the shooting because he was worried his employers would not think he had put up enough of a fight, but as time went on, some whispered that he had been in cahoots with the robber. Moore was anxious to show that he had done everything he could to protect his employer's goods, even claiming that he had managed to hide some money by kicking a sack of bills out of sight while the robber was distracted. His employers announced that they had total faith in him, but he had been immediately suspended from duty after the robbery and was under continual surveillance.

A week after the Borden's Grove find and nearly a fortnight after the robbery, American Express issued an official statement: 'We have got a pretty good clue to the robber and we are going to get him. It may take time, but we will run him down if we have to follow him to "Kingdom Come" . . . Watch us while we nab the robber.' So watch the people of New York did, for weeks on end. But still there was no arrest.