The Laying On of Hands for Fingerprints: Woman Expert Thinks System Will Not Be Confined to Criminals, but Will Become Universal—Chinese Used It for Identification Sixteen Centuries Ago

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ave your fingerprints been taken in recent years? Perhaps you breathe at the question. Probably you think that nothing like that would ever be done to you. But your fingerprints index, and that the procedure is, in consequence, extremely hard for you to escape. Every caller and soldier serving the United States are on record, and the same is true of many of the employees of the Polo Club. In Argentina it is true of every civilian. In time it may be true of everyone.

In cases of unidentified dead, of kidnapping, of loss of memory, of libelous ex parte papers, of insurance records, of personal documents, of maquers and pretenders for romantic or criminal purposes, consider the value of the fingerprint. No man could drop his old life and begin another. Per his hands ye shall know him. It is scientifically conceived now that the little lidges at the tips of your digits afford the most exclusive symbol of personal identification known, and that in all human probability they are invariable. They are unchangeable at birth, unalterable by habit, and, have been observed in Egyptian mummies.

Fingerprints are unchangeable, except temporarily by the use of acids, an expedient by which criminals have on occasion escaped. Criminals are learning also to use gloves. They have resisted fingerprinting on constitutional grounds, as giving testimony against themselves, but have been overruled. They have good reason for objecting to the system, and for seeking to evade it. But what reason have you?

Gertrude Meredith Sullender thinks you have no reason. Miss Sullender is the only woman fingerprint expert holding a civil service position in New York City. Mrs. Mary E. Holland, wife of a Chicago detective, was one of its pioneers in this country, and taught the men who established the bureau for the United States Navy. Miss Sullender has been there four years. Several other women are now engaged in the work for the Navy Bureau.

"The popular prejudice against fingerprinting is so great," Miss Sullender said, "that the bureau can't get men to work there while it is universally applied. It has been valuable chiefly in the detective and convicting departments, where it is a rule that this is all it is good for. As a matter of fact, it is valuable as much for the purposes of identification as for conviction. It has saved criminals, for instance, when they were falsely accused on account of their lost records."

"I remember that when I was finishing my studies at Washington in the Navy Bureau, a man came in and asked that his fingerprints be made. He was going to the Philippines, and thought something might happen to him there. It was an unusual request in those days, long before the war, and it happened that the man had no occasion to identify himself, but it was evidence even then of an intelligent attitude toward the system."

"We hope some day to see a general approach to the fingerprinting system. If documents were signed with fingerprints as well as the name, for instance, identification would be much more likely. It was so with the Chinese used them. A Chinese when he was ready to make his will, for instance, would dictate it to the confidential and read it to them, and then they would sign it to fingerprint it as evidence that they had indeed heard it. It was a kind of ritual, but it was an identification which must have been hard on the Chinese lawyer."

"A universal fingerprint system would be of constant value, not just to the police, but chiefly to the average citizen. Dr. Jane Varich, Chief of the Bureau of Identification of Buenos Aires and of the Argentine War Department, who visited the United States in 1913, tried to explain to us then how valuable the system was, for they apply it everywhere. In Argentina, but it was not then, for then he had to make a great impression. I believe that in time the public will come to a realization of its advantages."

"It was not until 1917 that a society was formed in New York on behalf of general fingerprinting. It was called the First National Scientific Registration Society, and was organized at the home of Mrs. John King Van Rensselaer "for the protection of life and property." But amid the sound and fury of the war among the million, which have been made no too have been found alike. The wheels, hoops, and arches of the city riders on your fingers differ from the wheels, hoops, and arches on other fingers, and each of your fingers is different. There is a minute system of classifying them, so that they can be read and found quickly. You may alter your appearance in other ways, as by shaving your mustache, but you cannot alter your finger tips; and they afford evidence more positive than photographs, or even the Bertillon measurements, which detail the bony structure. There was the remarkable case of "dual identity," for instance, the Federal Prison at Leavenworth, Kan. Will West, a negro housebreaker, was taken to Leavenworth Prison, while Will West, of the same name, was in the New York State Prison."

Six years after the system was established.

Charles Criqui, one of an organized gang of thieves, removed a pane of glass from a door leading into a Woolster Street loft. Joseph A. Faure, Inspector in charge of the New York City Police Detective Bureau, found a fingerprint on that glass, and its duplicate in his files; for Criqui, a mere strippling, boasted a dozen aliases and was an old offender. He confessed on the strength of the fingerprint evidence.

Every one in so much of the Oriental world makes what it regards as an epochal discovery, only to find that the Oriental world was first in the field. It was so with the mariner's compass, for instance. It has been so with the fingerprint. The Chinese used it for legal purposes sixteen centuries ago. But in this case we may be said to have borrowed the "discovery" from the Orient, for Sir William Herschel, during his service in India (1832-78) laid the foundations of the modern system on which he found there. The Chinese had imparted their knowledge to the Tibetans and thence to their more western neighbors, and Sir William used by direction from the Indians what the Chinese had learned in 300 B.C.

Rashbush, the famous Persian historian, wrote in 3003 as follows: It is usual in Ojutik, when any contract or other business is transacted, for those of the parties to be traced upon the document. For superintendence that no one individual has fingerprints alike.

Even earlier testimony was offered by the Arab merchant Soleiman, who wrote in 851 A.D. that in China creditors' bills were marked by the debtor with his middle finger and index; and contracts found in Turkestan, dated 782 and 786 A.D., were provided with the fingerprints of both parties.

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