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A man of more than ordinary education

THE RANSOM NOTE

The Note Arrives

Family friend and attorney Sam Ettelson spent a sleepless night with Jacob Franks after helping him search the neighborhood and the Harvard School for clues about Bobby Franks's disappearance. After hearing about "Mr. Johnson's" sinister conversation with Flora Franks—who took the kidnapper's call while they were out, and had not yet recovered from her faint when they returned—they paid a quiet 2 a.m. visit to the detective bureau to ask for advice. But they refused any practical help from police because they were afraid that any visible detective activity, or publicity that might come from an item on the police blotter, could trigger a fatal reaction from the kidnapper. Ettelson also called the phone company and requested that any further calls to the Franks home be traced. But in the morning he was told by a friend of the family that the friend "had called the home and had heard telephone operators gossiping about the tracing of the calls"—a bit of gossip which any calling kidnapper might similarly happen to hear—and so Ettelson immediately called off the tracing of the line.

He was still present to witness the arrival of the ransom note by special-delivery courier at 9 a.m. the next morning. "Its deliberate tone struck terror into our hearts," he told reporters. For the second time in 24 hours, Bobby's mother fainted, and a doctor had to be called.

THE RANSOM NOTE that arrived at the Franks home the next morning assured Jacob Franks that his son was still "well and safe" but threatened that, should he fail to obey instructions for delivering a $10,000 ransom payment, "his death will be the penalty." Franks spent much of that day preparing the money in accordance with the demands. Around 3 p.m., "Mr. Johnson" phoned again with detailed instructions about getting into a Yellow cab that would be sent to the house shortly to take Franks to a drugstore where he would wait for yet another set of instructions to be phoned to him there. But Franks could hardly focus on what Mr. Johnson was saying, because he had just gotten another call, from his brother-in-law Ed Gresham, who'd gone down to a morgue in northern Indiana to look at the corpse of a boy found in a culvert that morning on the unlikely chance that it might be Bobby's. Gresham was calling from the morgue to confirm that it was.

From the moment the case hit the city papers, it was front-page news. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* called it "one of the most baffling in the city's annals," not just because the coroner who examined the body could not immediately determine the cause of death, but because the kidnapper's motivation was completely mystifying. If the boy had really been kidnapped for money, why had the kidnapper killed him without waiting to see if the ransom would be paid?

Speculation immediately focused on the two obvious clues: a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles found near Bobby's body, and the ransom note itself, whose text, the newspapers—as well as detectives—quickly concluded, had been written by "a man of more than ordinary education." But why would such a man need to obtain such a large sum of money by such unsavory means? Was he a drug addict with an expensive habit? A teacher at Bobby's school who knew his rich father would pay any price to get him back? A sexual predator who had killed Bobby in order not to be identified after molesting him, then concocted the ransom note as a smoke screen?

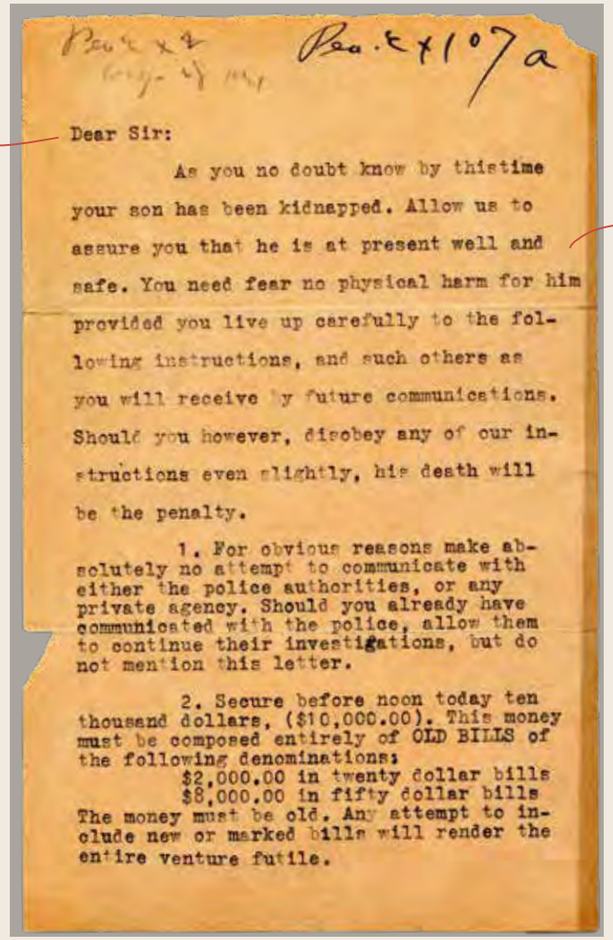
H.P. Sutton, an expert employed by the Royal Typewriter Company, identified the type on the note as belonging to "an Underwood portable typewriter purchased less than three years ago," with a defective lowercase *t* and *f* (see page 9). In addition, he asserted, the writer was a novice typist. "A person using the touch system strikes the keys pretty evenly," he said. "The man who wrote this was either a novice at typing or else used two fingers. Some of the letters were punched so hard they were almost driven through the paper, while others were struck lightly or uncertainly."

Northwestern University Archives

Forensic typewriting sample from the ransom note, introduced as evidence in the case.

Detectives also quickly noticed a peculiar resemblance the note bore to a fictional ransom note that had recently appeared in a short story by Christopher B. Booth called "The Kidnaping Syndicate" in *Detective Story Magazine*. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* published the notes side by side to highlight the similarities—the businesslike introduction, followed by four numbered instructions along the same lines—and concluded that the letter to Franks, "though couched in even more faultless rhetoric than the letter of the fiction writer, seems simply, paragraph by paragraph, paraphrased from that author's work."

"Look for the suspect with that magazine in his possession," detectives concluded, "and you'll pretty nearly have the man who killed Robert Franks."



Dear Sir:

As you no doubt know by thistime your son has been kidnapped. Allow us to assure you that he is at present well and safe. You need fear no physical harm for him provided you live up carefully to the following instructions, and such others as you will receive by future communications. Should you however, disobey any of our instructions even slightly, his death will be the penalty.

1. For obvious reasons make absolutely no attempt to communicate with either the police authorities, or any private agency. Should you already have communicated with the police, allow them to continue their investigations, but do not mention this letter.

2. Secure before noon today ten thousand dollars, ($10,000.00). This money must be composed entirely of OLD BILLS of the following denominations:
$2,000.00 in twenty dollar bills
$8,000.00 in fifty dollar bills
The money must be old. Any attempt to include new or marked bills will render the entire venture futile.

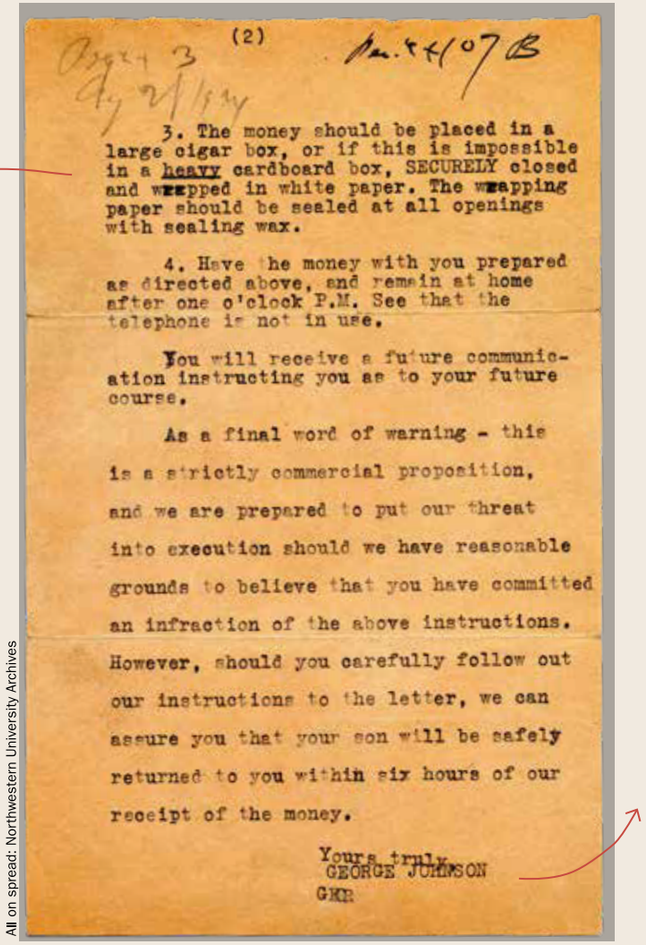
DEAR SIR: The note was generically addressed to "Sir" because Leopold and Loeb typed it up the evening before the murder, before deciding for certain whom the victim would be.

FOUR-BAR CANCEL: When asked for a possible explanation of why the postmark would have been wrong, Chicago postal historian Leonard Piszkiewicz noticed the use of four lines, or bars, across the faces of the stamps to cancel them, and replied that the four-bar was a brand new cancellation stamp at the time. In fact, before this discovery its first documented use had been 10 days later than this, on May 31. Piszkiewicz speculated that the special delivery clerk hadn't yet got the hang of this newfangled rubber stamp, which worked differently from the old steel ones—and that's why the date setting hadn't been changed to May 22. In addition to its significance to the Leopold and Loeb case, the envelope is now the earliest known use of the four-bar cancel in Chicago postal history.

***DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE*:** The newspapers somewhat exaggerated the similarity between the note and a fictional ransom note published in a story in the May 3, 1924, issue of *Detective Story Magazine*, assigning four numbered paragraphs to the fictional letter so it would more exactly match the format of the note to the Franks family. In the fictional story, "The Kidnaping Syndicate," as in the real-life case, a detective notes the language and tactics of a superior breed of kidnapper: "I think . . . you're up against a most unusual criminal," he tells the victim's husband. "An educated man, I should say; a man whose mind has been trained to think along very logical lines. It's certainly something new in kidnaping."

INCORRECT POSTMARK: The murder was committed around 5 p.m. on May 21 and the letter was mailed late that evening, so clearly it could not have actually been stamped at 1 a.m. on the morning of May 21. The postmarks on the reverse side of the envelope confirm that it was actually being processed in the early morning of May 22, arriving at the Main Post Office at 2 a.m. and in the Hyde Park office at 6 a.m.—before being delivered to the Franks home around 9 a.m.

CLUES IN THE TYPEFACE: Brilliant as they were, Leopold and Loeb failed to foresee what an expert would be able to deduce from analyzing the note: that it had been written on an Underwood portable typewriter with a defective lowercase *t* and *f*—and that the typist was a novice or someone using two fingers, since "some of the letters were punched so hard they were almost driven through the paper, while others were struck lightly or uncertainly."



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3. The money should be placed in a large cigar box, or if this is impossible in a heavy cardboard box, SECURELY closed and wrapped in white paper. The wrapping paper should be sealed at all openings with sealing wax.

4. Have the money with you prepared as directed above, and remain at home after one o'clock P.M. See that the telephone is not in use.

You will receive a future communication instructing you as to your future course.

As a final word of warning - this is a strictly commercial proposition, and we are prepared to put our threat into execution should we have reasonable grounds to believe that you have committed an infraction of the above instructions. However, should you carefully follow out our instructions to the letter, we can assure you that your son will be safely returned to you within six hours of our receipt of the money.

Yours truly,
GEORGE JOHNSON
GKR

HANDWRITTEN ADDRESS: The envelope was handwritten after the killing, rather than typed up in advance, again so that Leopold and Loeb could wait till the last minute to select a victim. It was mailed on the way home from hiding Bobby's body—after Leopold had already telephoned the Franks home, calling himself "George Johnson," and told Mrs. Franks that her son had been kidnapped but was safe.

All on spread: Northwestern University Archives

GKR: One of the myths that grew up around the note, sometimes reported as fact, was that the three initials appearing below the GEORGE JOHNSON signature belonged to Germaine K. ("Patches") Reinhard, one of Loeb's occasional girlfriends. A few days after the confessions, when someone apparently told police that her initials had been added to suggest that the very professional-sounding note had been typed by a secretary, Reinhard was called in for questioning. Described by the *Chicago Daily Tribune* as a "chic shocker nicknamed 'Patches,'" she told the paper she had worked her way up as Loeb's girlfriend from only getting what she described as "the bad nights of the week, the Tuesdays and the Thursdays, you know," to getting "the big nights, Saturdays and Sundays," and had last been out with him two days after the murder. Detectives released her after examining the letters under a microscope and seeing that they actually said GEOR, as if the paper had slipped out of the typewriter before the first attempt at a signature was completed.