

The Detective System

The Necessity Of The Detective System Generally Discussed—The State Of Society Which Created It—The Regular And Irregular Robbers —The Young Man Of Intelligence Entering Upon Active Life, A Picture—He Naturally Allies Himself To The Tyrant And Robbing Classes—No Honesty In Trade—Trade Rules; And All Are Corrupt—No Conscience Among The Traffickers—Lying A Fine Art— All Villains, But None Individually At Fault —The Detective Belongs To The Corrupt Governing Classes—Weighing Him—Great Thieves—“The Purveyors Of Hell”—The Eternal Talkers, And What They Amount To— The Use For Detectives—An Incident; “Catching A Flat”—The Detective’s Vocation Further Considered—How The Detectives Protect Society—Illustrative Incidents—A Certain Great Detective Described—Stratagems—What The Philosophers Say—On The Whole, Is The Detective System From Above Or Below?

By George McWatters

THE chief articles of “Knots Untied” being in type, I am asked by the publishers to add thereto my views upon the detective system in general. Much misjudgment has been indulged in by some in regard to the moral merits of the system. Indeed, some writers have been so rash as to condemn it altogether. But these are persons of very peculiar mental and moral construction, in my opinion. They have not, it is evident, studied deeply or thoroughly the condition of things which demands the detective system for its protection and support.

It has been most wisely said, that “Society creates, for the most part, the crimes which it punishes.” It is a sad truth, but one to be dispassionately considered—not overlooked. The wonder to my mind is that there are not more criminals in society than there are, so heartless are the institutions of civilization in general, so lax the morality of business life, so hypocritical the common tone of society everywhere, from among the least up to the greatest of the participants, in what, as a whole, we call a community, a town, a city, or a nation.

Everywhere I see injustice and wrong triumphing over justice and the right; everywhere petty political successes, vain social triumphs, and especially the victories of wealth, emulated and worshipped. The crown for which the child is usually instructed to bend all his efforts hangs on the pinnacle of vanity or pride. He is expected to obtain it in business life, by gathering under his feet a pile of gold high enough to enable him to stand up, and reach out his hand to it; and he is taught that it is no matter how he gets the gold, so that he avoids all legal difficulties in the way; and he is further instructed that when he shall have acquired a certain amount of gold he need fear no law, for he can buy juries and judges then, and be “a law unto himself;” and he grows up to manhood and active life under these holy instructions.

Looking around him, as a man, he sees that everybody is striving for the same object which he would reach; and however his own sense of right may disturb him in his first misstep from her path, he soon learns that the “common law,” the highest morality, in other words, on Change, is to “buy at the lowest possible prices, and sell for as much as you can.” He becomes extortionate

when he can, and rejoices in whatever panic “sends up” his own stocks, for example, although it may ruin a thousand others, and bring desolation to countless homes. He sees, if he lives in New York, that Wall Street is a den of thieves, “respectable” ones; and he finds its counterparts all through the city, down into the lowest haunts of vice, where squalor and want, added to crime, make the last disreputable.

But his mind is logical, and he sees that there is no difference in principle between making a “corner” in Wall Street, and thus robbing a man of fifty shares of a given railroad stock, and the picking of his pocket of those shares in the graceful way in which the *chevaliers d’industrie* do it. He sees the real estate owner, who has already received in rents, from his tenants, ten times as much money as a certain building cost him, years ago (exclusive, at that, of the legal interest on the original investment), raising the rent as often as he dare, and frequently ejecting, into the merciless world, the family of a poor man who cannot meet the advanced rent, on the one side: and on the other, he witnesses a highway robber snatch a cloak from the shoulders of a man, or a bundle from a lady’s arms; or a sneak thief escaping from a hall door with a garment in his hands; and for the life of him he cannot see any real moral difference in the two “sides;” on both are extortion and robbery.

He sees vast monopolies arising, and breaking down small dealers. He sees the merchant princes absorbing the businesses once conducted by smaller traders, and usurping even the trades; so that, now, for example, several hundred dress-makers, once scattered over various parts of the city, and then living in a good degree of independence, are to be found gathered in a herd, if they have employment at all, the merest wages-slaves of some mercantile lord turned manufacturer, too, as well: or, if without employment by some large house, forced by the lower rates which the monopolists charge for their poorly paid-for goods, to live along on starvation wages.

In short, the man sees about him the greed of gain in all its hateful and diabolical phases—and he meditates: “This is the world I am born into; this the field I must win my successes in; there are but comparatively two classes,—the successful and proud, who govern every-thing, and enjoy everything, and the unsuccessful and the wretched, who have nothing but woes and toils, and who enjoy nothing—but what they have. I must make my choice between the two. I cannot suffer myself to belong to the latter class.”

Thus determining, he enters upon the busy scenes of life; and if a merchant, he misrepresents his goods, for he knows that all other merchants do the same; he scruples at no falsity, so that it is not so palpable and clear as to defeat his chief purpose of cheating,—the achievement of profits. He lies to enhance in the purchaser’s eyes the real merits of his wares, and he lies to cover up their demerits. He hears that some merchant is trading upon a reputation he has somehow acquired of being an honest dealer. Laughing in his sleeve over this,—for well he knows that an honest man, in the competitive sphere of trade, is too much of a *lusus naturae* to have an actual existence,—he casts about to rival the other in this matter of profitable reputation, and learn “how he does it.” He finds that his competitor has joined Beecher’s, or some other popular church, and gone to teaching Sunday school. He follows suit,—and thus makes religion useful and available in trade.

Taking pains to get his church membership noised about, he now adds sanctimony to his other facial graces, and lies with a more effective air than before. If a merchant in wet goods, he goes a step farther than before in their adulteration; if in dry goods, he puts upon his poorer silks and cottons, etc., the stamps which belong to better ones; and so he lives on and thrives, and builds him a mansion in Fifth Avenue, or some other fashionable quarter, and is a man beloved and respected, and powerful among the people.

Or, may be, he turns politician, makes his way into the city government, sets his active genius to work, and invents numerous jobs to be done at the public expense, and manages to reap a hundred, or several hundred per cent, profit thereon; becomes a money-lord and a chief ruler, and is noted and respected, and for his thefts of millions, perhaps, makes restitution by a large munificent donation to the poor of the city. Or he goes into Wall Street, and robs und swindles there till he gets to be a power, and lords it over sundry railroad and other vast interests, and is a very demigod.

In all he is a representative man; for throughout all the departments of trade and business, from the greatest to the least, all are swindlers, to more or less extent. Nobody better than the detective knows how absurd and ridiculous it is to talk of “honesty in trade,” for he is quite as likely to be called upon to ferret out and arrest a forger or a cheat in the respectable ranks of business as he is to entrap a common pickpocket. The detective knows too much to believe in the honesty of any one as a trader. He may be a good-hearted, companionable fellow, generous to his friends, kind to his family, a nobleman by nature, but in trade he is dishonest; not that he would prefer to be so even there, but because business rules and customs make him so. Take the most nearly just man, as a merchant or manufacturer, to be found in the country, and prove to the detective (or any other man well informed as to the crafts of business), if you can, that that trader or manufacturer will not ask for his goods as large a profit as he can get, —always the market price, at least,— and think himself not only not wrong in so doing, but actually right, no matter how the “market price” is made, whether by the withholding from the market of a large amount of a given commodity in order to “raise the price” (which is simply, in other words, to rob the more) or not.

I have never known a half dozen traders in my life who had any moral perceptions on this point. Lying is said to be a fine art in China. Nothing wrong is perceived in it by the Celestials. Just as some people have no ear for music, no sense for the harmony of sounds, so they, the Chinese, seem to have no sense or perception of the beauty of truth. Just so in the business life of our own people ; hardly a man of all sees or understands that it is not right for him to receive as great a profit on his goods as he can “honorably get” (i. e., no matter how, so that he gets it,—for the getting is the soul of business life). What is true of the business morality of New York, is true of the trading morality of the whole country. New York is the chief market town, and rules in prices and modes of dealing.

The trader, with lack of conscience; the lawyer, whose interest it is to win his cases at all hazards, and bring his witnesses up to the right point for victory; the broker, who has no conscience (save when not pretending to have any); the manufacturers of flour and other food for the market, who adulterate their goods, or pass upon the community poor ones for good ones (and all do more or less of this); the liquor merchant, who poisons his wines and brandies with

strychnine, etc., in order that he may give them a “bead,” after having adulterated them as much as he can: the quack-medicine dealers, and the ten thousand other comparatively respectable shams and cheats of society, are all on a plane, in point of principle, with the pickpocket and the sneak thief; while the braver men, who rob whole railroads, etc., at a time, rise to the dignity of highwaymen. And there is still another class of moral worthies, the large manufacturers, who, monopolizing certain great industries, force the poor, through their necessities, into perpetual slavery to them, and render back for their hard labor just enough to keep them from the grave, and make them useful; and these occupy the position of the cruel and heartless slaveholder.

Let not the reader suppose that I blame any of these characters individually. Society’s laws and customs make them what they are. They must be so, or must be content to be of the oppressed classes. There are but two great classes in civilization, —the oppressed and the oppressors, the trampled upon and the trampers. To the latter class belongs the detective. He is dishonest, crafty, unscrupulous, when necessary to be so. He tells black lies when he cannot avoid it; and white lying, at least, is his chief stock in trade. He is the outgrowth of a diseased and corrupted state of things, and is, consequently, morally diseased himself. His very existence is a satire upon society. He is a miserable snake, not in a paradise, but in the social hell. He is a thief, and steals into men’s confidences to ruin them. He makes friends in order to reap the profits of betraying them. He is as bad in these days as was his prototype, St. Paul in his, “all things to all men,” but like him, he is defensible, in that his rogueries and villainies are practiced for other people’s “salvation” or security; and, aside from the fact that the detective, in his calling, is often degraded to a sort of watchman or ordinary policeman, to help the big thieves, the merchants, etc., protect themselves from the small thieves, who are not able to keep places of business, and to perform sundry other undignified work, his calling is a very noble one, and a singularly blessed one, inasmuch as it is the only one which I call to mind, by which hypocrisy is elevated into a really useful and beneficent art.

It is true, as I lately saw in a cursory glance at the book notices in some journal, that somebody in Europe has written a work entitled “The Purveyors of Hell,” in which, with the keen discrimination of an intelligent and honest man, he inveighs against the secret service and detective system as an immense corrupter of mankind, and aims heavy blows, I suppose, at it. The author, I think, cannot be far from right in his abhorrence of the system, but I am afraid that, like too many other doctors of morals, he uses his scalpel on, and directs his medicines to, the effects, and not the causes, of the evils he would cure.

The detective has one palliative to his conscience which the criminal and thief— be he a regular or irregular one, a business man with a shop, or without one—has not; for he, in his trickeries, his lies, his false seeming, his unscrupulous betrayal of his victims, has ever the consciousness that he is operating as an aid to justice, and that in her cause is it that he commits whatever outrages he may do to truth and fair dealing. His position is paradoxical in a measure. He has the satisfaction of knowing that if he lies and cheats, he is no worse for this, in a business way, than his neighbors, and that his frauds are exercised to protect them in keeping whatever ill-gotten gains they may have in the shape of property, from being stolen from them by some of the rest of his (and their) neighbors; or in the discovery of criminals, such as murderers and assassins, in order that they may be punished, to satisfy the majesty of the law, made by the society which

made the criminals. In this sense he is a public benefactor, and better entitled to the honors he wins in society than is, perhaps, any other useful citizen of the governing classes.

Whatever is bad in the detective's career, society has created for him to perform, and compelled him to do it. However unpleasant to himself his business may be, he has the happiness of knowing that in its results it is good,—that is, if it be good to preserve the present order of things; for without the detective the laws, such as they are, could not well be enforced; for so cunning have the crafts of business made our unfortunate criminal classes, that the ordinary officers of the law cannot surprise or entrap them; and, allowed to pursue their business uninterrupted, the pickpockets, counterfeiterers, forgers, bank-robbers, and so forth, would soon monopolize the business of the country to the disparagement of the money brokers, grain and cotton exchangers, the land speculators, the usurers, the railroad robbers, the wholesale and retail merchants, the private bankers, etc., who, with less keen talent than the independent pickpocket proper, are obliged to have laws framed to help them in their iniquity, while he operates against the law.

To preserve the weaker of the cormorant classes in their "lawful" pursuits, therefore, the detective is absolutely a necessity in society, and as such should be as much esteemed as any other necessity. Obvious is it, then, that the writer of the work alluded to—"Purveyors of Hell"—is an impractical enthusiast in the cause of abstract right and truth. It would seem that he, poor man, believes in some system of abstract and speculative morality as a governing and directing force in society, without any regard to the customs of trade, etc., which obtain in a civilization, the main end of which is to enable its chief individual participants to "make money" by various means of enticing it out of their neighbors' pockets and filching it from the hands of labor.

This sort of abstract morality, spiritual morality, which is talked from every pulpit in the land to audiences composed, for the main part, of people who, however strict attention they may pay to the talkers, punctuate the sentences of their discourses for them with scheming-thoughts of what they are going to do in a business-way the next day—has failed of its desired results often enough, one would think, to confound the talkers. The wonder to me is that the intelligent classes do not, more than they do, look things squarely in the face, and see for themselves how utterly hopeless it is to ever do without the detective in society, so long as our legislators make ten laws for the protection of property to one for man; so long as the "sacredness of property" is a phrase which sanctifies the protection of all ill-gotten gains, if they but be gotten in some regular, or not too irregular, way, even more surely than it covers or protects the products of actual hard labor,—the very things of all that need protection, and the protecting of which, in the hands of those to whom they rightly belong, the laborers, would secure all other rights in society; for surely the defrauding of labor is the radical iniquity of the age (as it has been that of all the historic ages, so far as I can learn), out of which spring all the rest of the corruptions of society.

But the talkers do not care to meddle with reforms which have a wise, radical end in view. They hate things which are radical. They dislike to disturb the "foundations of society." They are wiser than their Master, and have so veiled his philosophy and teachings of a politico-economical kind, that he would not, were he to reappear on earth, here in New York, be able to tell the difference, in point of principle, between a Wall Street broker, owning the chief pew in one of the talkers'

temples, and being a principal pillar thereof, from one of those wily rascals whom he saw fit to whip out of the sacred places some eighteen hundred and thirty odd years ago.

In those days the detective was as necessary as now; and it was by his aid, probably, that the society of Jerusalem was enabled to cohere. But the money-makers became so sharp and subtle, and got so well established in the practice of their iniquities in the very Porch of the Temple, that it became necessary for the great Detective and Reformer to come out of Nazareth, and search into their “ways which were dark,” and expose them. In fact it would seem that the detective system has the approval of very high authority, —so wise as not to be mistaken as to its fitness to “things as they are,” and are ever likely to be till some method is invented to do away with criminals, by making crime unattractive, and labor, honest toil, for what a man has a right to have, and no more, respectable and attractive.

I have hinted that the detective’s vocation has much to do with “ways that are dark.” So it has; and it might be inferred, perhaps, from what I have said, that his vocation has a bad influence upon his own interior nature. It is certain that it has no great tendency to elevate and refine him; but it would seem that the pursuit of devious ways for a good end has not the corrupting influence which the practice of falsehood for the mere aggrandizement of a man’s individual, selfish interests, exercises. Detectives are, for the most part, excellent citizens—very punctilious in observing the laws, themselves, as well as being social regulators to enforce others to respect them, also. Still, whatever the intrinsic moral life or character of the detective may be, his art is a devilish one, and civilization is responsible for it.

The use of the detective to society is not fully understood by the majority of the people, especially in country places; and visitors to a city like New York, or Philadelphia, little consider how much of their peace and security, when there, depend upon the quiet, silent, effective operations of the master detectives. The citizen or stranger, on visiting a great mercantile establishment like Stewart’s up-town store, usually but little understands what a system of detection is carried on there, not only for the protection of Mr. Stewart’s goods, but the purses of his customers, from the attractive powers of the graceful pickpocket’s fingers. But the amount of money which Stewart pays out annually for this sort of protection must be something large. In this way is dispensed to others a portion of the money which he, as a merchant, manages to win for himself from the labor-resources of the country by the jugglery of trade. There seems to be a sort of poetic justice in this. If Mr. Stewart, and the other enormous accumulators of wealth, were not obliged to employ others to help them protect it, there probably would be left to the poor but little else than the liberty to die, and be buried in paupers’ graves, at a more early date after birth than is now their wont to reach those hospitable quarters.

But everywhere throughout a great city, in the horse-cars, in Wall Street, in all the great stores, at the churches on Sundays, in the lager-beer gardens, on the steamboats at the wharves, on the ferry-boats, throughout the large manufactories, around various dens of iniquity, at the theatres, etc., the detective is at his work. To-day he perhaps personates one character; to-morrow, another. To-day he is a trader from the West, making purchases among sundry dealers in tobacco, perhaps; and as he glides around their establishments, prizing this or that stock which he is to purchase, ‘unless he can do better elsewhere,’ he is carefully noting everything; for he is for the time in the employ of the General Government, and it is suspected that the tobacconists are

defrauding the Treasury of the taxes, and he is in pursuit of evidence to convict them. Yesterday he hailed from New Hampshire, perhaps, and in the character of a countryman, was getting an insight into arts by which a sharper was fleecing, not only country people, but some of the residents of the city, too, by inveigling them into subscribing for stock in a fabulous gold, or silver, or lead mine, or some great colonizing project, and inducing them to advance ten or twenty per cent, on the nominal par value of the stock as a part of the working capital.

The detective, in the character of the countryman, presenting himself in fancy as my pen traced the lines next above, memory reverts to a notable instance, which I conceive is well worth recording here, wherein a detective friend of mine, in his *rôle* of a sort of Brother Jonathan, from New Hampshire, caught a bogus gold-mine speculator of New York in a very clever way, and accomplished the restitution of several thousand dollars (which had been advanced as per centage on the stock subscribed for by several different persons). The speculator, who was a man of considerable moneyed means, and therefore “responsible,” and thought to be, of course, “reliable,” on account of his being a man of property, had, in a very ingenious manner, organized a company to work a supposed gold mine in Virginia. He was president of the “company,” and his cousin was secretary. A northern geologist (a professor in a college not over a hundred and fifty miles in a bee line from New York city), was taken by this cousin on to Virginia to examine the mine, and make a report, which was duly done, the professor making a very attractive report. He found considerably more gold to the ton of quartz than is considered among miners “a fair, average yield.” The mine was indeed a very valuable one in his opinion, and would have been so in fact, if his conclusions had been drawn from honest premises; but the poor professor had no suspicion that the gold he found in his assay of the quartz, which he actually saw taken from the mine in question, got into his crucible in a mysterious way, and never belonged to the quartz which he had taken so much pains to pulverize.

The president had so deftly drawn up the printed constitution, or articles of incorporation, and by-laws of the company, that he could easily and legally resign his position, and withdraw when he pleased from the association, and carry off all the funds advanced, without fear of legal trouble from his victims. But after a large amount of the stock had been subscribed, and the advanced assessments of twenty per cent, called in (when somewhat over half the nominal stock had been subscribed), one of the victims got his eyes open, and wanted his money back. He saw that it was of no use to complain to the president (I will call the latter Sharp, and my friend the detective, Flat, for short), so he made his case known to a lawyer, who directed him to engage Flat, who, he thought, and thought rightly, would ‘work up the job safely.’ Flat managed to get himself into Sharp’s acquaintance outside of business hours, as a curious fellow,—a nondescript old bachelor,—from Alton, New Hampshire, owning several farms, and with more money than he knew what to do with.

Of course Sharp needed *him*, and used his best arts to get him to take stock. Flat agreed to call and look, into the “darned thing,” and if he liked it he’d “go in.” He called. Sharp showed him the books. Flat found the amount of stock subscribed just as Sharp told him, and of course was pleased at first, and was about to subscribe, himself— when a “notion struck him.”

“See here,” said he, “these names is all correct, I guess. I don’t know the writin’; but how do I know they ar’ all genooine?”

Sharp, in his way, “satisfied” Flat on that head.

“But,” said Flat, “has all these fellurs paid up their ‘cessments?”

Sharp assured him they had.

“Wa’al, how do I know? I don’t see no proof on’t here,” said Flat, pointing to the subscription stock-book.

Sharp explained; but Flat was thick-headed, and would not understand or believe anything till Sharp should have entered against each man’s name the amount of the assessment he had paid, and then he would take his pick of ‘em, he said, and go and ax ‘em right to thar heads,’ and ef he found all right, he’d subscribe, and ‘go in his full length.’

Sharp saw nothing not flat and silly in this, and he agreed to it of course, for well he knew that all the stockholders would be glad to get more money into the treasury to develop the mine with. They would, of course, all tell Flat that they had paid up, and so confirm Sharp’s word. Flat quietly visited two or three of the heaviest stock holders, and informed them how they were cheated, and they became as anxious as his employer to have the scamp caught; and after two days, Flat called again upon Sharp, taking a couple of modest friends along with him, of whom he could manage to make witnesses in an emergency. Sharp was all ready, greeted him cordially, pointed out to him carefully, and with much apparent pride, the names of the stockholders who had paid up their assessments, and explained to him that certain checks he had put against their names meant that they had paid, and showed how much each had paid.

Flat was a little thick-headed, but saw “straight” at last. “I declare,” said Flat, “that are’s famous,” taking hold of the book; “neow do tell me what your expenses is in runnin’ this here company? What d’they charge you for this here nice book, to begin with?” (The book was gotten up with considerable care as to appearances.)

Sharp thought it a stupid question, but humored Flat, and told him that it was worth twenty-five dollars; but that he had an eye to economy for the company, and “jewed “ down the price to eighteen dollars.

“Wa’al,” said Flat, “that’s cheaper an’ I can git one anywheres else; guess I’ll take it; talk of gittin’ up a company myself; “ and he appropriated the book, to Sharp’s amazement.

He had all he wanted; evidence enough as to who had been swindled, and how much, etc. The matter was all brought down to a point, and Sharp was arrested by one of Flat’s friends, while Flat bore away the book to a safe place. Suffice it, that Sharp was so securely caught that he did not go home to his pleasant residence in New Jersey that day so early as usual, or not until every dollar he had swindled from his victims was secured, and in the way of getting back to their hands. This was “Catching a Flat” with a vengeance for Mr. Sharp.

But this is only an illustrative case of the best and most honorable class of the detective’s work, and one of the comparatively “genteel” cases too. His field of labor is usually more thorny, and

his work at times not only very perplexing, on account of the subtle characters he has to deal with, but very laborious in view of the much travelling, nights and days, which many jobs occasion. The tracking out of bank robbers, searching for the hiding-places of their stolen treasures, and various like things, will suggest the great amount of real, hard, physical labor the detective sometimes has to perform. Only he can do it. He cannot delegate his powers to any great extent. If he employs others, it is only as aids, not as substitutes. He is expected to know everything in the ways of business regular and business irregular. If he would succeed as a detective of bank robbers, especially, he must not only know all the rogues of that class, but he must understand what class of "workmen" they are: for these industrious, hard-working bank-robbers all have different ways of doing their work; possess different degrees of skill; and when the robbery of a bank is reported to a detective, his first inquiry is directed to the manner in which the "work" was done.

Some workmen of this class have very little skill of a mechanical kind. They do their work bunglingly, and never attempt very difficult jobs. Others are very skillful; are ready to undertake anything. The most skillful bank-robbers, of twenty or twenty-five years ago, would only be bunglers now. The thousand new devices for safe-locks, security of vaults, and so forth, would entirely confound them. But as genius makes progress in the arts of security, the bank-robbers keep pace. Their profession increases in dignity among themselves in proportion to the new and great difficulties which they surmount. They are of different classes, of different degrees of merit in their vocation, and the detective must know at once by their "chips" to what class belonged the scamps who robbed this or that bank; for if he did not know he would be liable to get on the wrong track, and so the scamps would gain all the time they need for putting themselves in perfect security. And the detective must know the character and relative "standing" of the members of other divisions of the "cross" classes, as they are designated in the technical phrase of the profession.

So the detective's calling is one which demands not only much cunning, but much general and accurate knowledge of human character, and not a little acquaintance with all sorts of business. He may be illiterate, as many an excellent detective is, for he has perhaps climbed up from unfortunate and poor early surroundings by force of his natural abilities, and not by any adventitious aid of the schools. If he cannot solve problems of the higher mathematics, he can unravel mysteries which would confound a Newton or a Laplace; and to keep pace with the "enlightened progress" of bank-robbers, counterfeiters, and so forth, the detective must not only be alert, but clearheaded. He must be honest, too, punctiliously so in a business sense; for he must keep within certain limits, observe certain rules of honor in his dealings with thieves and outlaws, otherwise he would often find himself lacking in one case evidence which he wants in another; or having one scoundrel in his power, could never use him as state's evidence to criminate another, his confederate, and a more dangerous person than he; for there is certainly "honor among thieves," as among other business men. There must be a certain degree of it, else business itself would die out or go into anarchy. Honor enough to preserve the integrity of his business every thief has. The detective could not afford to have less than the thief. He is a sort of prince, in the thieves' opinion. He is the only man for whom they have any real respect.

With the detective the thief usually "keeps faith," if he plights him his "word and honor as a gentleman!" (Strange words to fall from a thief's mouth, but after all a most appropriate source;

for a true man has no need to indorse his yea or nay with an oath of honor.) The detective is a power among the thieves; his are the laws they obey. They fear only him. He is a necessity, then, for protecting society against the frauds, [s]peculations, and robberies of these irregular business men. He governs the cities, and protects them, so far as controlling the rapacity of the irregular robbers is concerned. But few people resident of a city like New York, and but few strangers coming to the city, consider or ever know how continually they are under the protection of the invisible detective; invisible to them, but “seen and known of all men” in the irregular vocations of business.

The detective is ever about in public places, exercising his calling for the protection of the thousands who know him not. For example, strangers from the country visiting New York generally attend the theatres, more or less, especially if they are very puritanic at home, and some such play as the Black Crook is ruling at Niblo’s, for instance. Of course the country gentlemen, whether deacons, or what not, in their respective rural districts, must see the “sensations.” What else do they come to New York for, to be sure? On business? Yes, the detective who knows them all, and can tell at sight from what parts of the try they individually come, knows that they visit New York “on business;” for he sees them at the theatres, and often gets sight of them going into places where very wise people do not go, but where wisdom of a certain sort is to be obtained nevertheless; and so he knows that they come to the city only on business. But he keeps an eye out for them constantly.

They go to Niblo’s, perchance, to see some spectacular play, like the “White Fawn,” or the “Black Crook,” to which we have referred before. They go in great crowds. They have their “Sunday clothes” on, watch chains in sight, pocket-books insecurely guarded, etc., and they sit out the hours and listen to the play, and are delighted, and go quietly out, away to their hotels, or among their friends, unconscious all the while that at the theatre they owed their security from pickpockets, and that class of skilled gentlemen, to a single, quiet man, whom they may not have deigned to cast a look upon as they passed through the vestibule into the body of the theatre; but he was there, having a care for them all. He is one of the chief men of his vocation in the land or the world. The thieves and pickpockets all know him, and respect him.

Standing near by the gateway in the railing which crosses the vestibule, is this gentleman to be seen. He is of rather more than medium height—a muscular, but not large man, has a face of regular cast of features, and a very fine intellectual brow. He is rather more than a good-looking man; a handsome man, indeed; and a gentleman of courteous manners. He is always well dressed, but never over-dressed; he exercises excellent taste in this respect. He is the only man in New York, perhaps, who could perfectly fill the place he occupies in that vestibule now as the guardian of the thousands who pass through that little gate. He seems not to be observing anything in particular; but you may hear him as you pass through the gate, perhaps, speak to some one in the crowd moving on with you; and turning about, you observe that a fine-looking gentleman has stepped aside to speak with the accomplished public guardian, Wm. George Elder (for that is his name), and the gentleman whom he has quietly called to him is an accomplished pickpocket. The detective is informing him that he must not go in now; some other night, perhaps, he may. That pickpocket has, perhaps, been long away from the city, for years, at Boston, or New Orleans, and thought the detective had forgotten him. But the detective has an excellent memory, and he never forgets his “friends,” he says; and this pickpocket he had, years

ago, enrolled among the best of his friends, because he had taken his advice, and left the city, with the promise never to return; and the detective gently reminds him of his promise and his “honor;” and the pickpocket, all smiles, and graciousness, —for he is a very gentleman in his line of business, —bows himself off.

One after another the detective arrests the pickpockets quietly, and sends them away. None of them whom he has ever seen escapes him, however much disguised. But there may be some new ones, some lately arrived from London (the fruitful mother and skillful educator of this enterprising class of our fellow-men), or from somewhere else, whom the detective has never seen, and who have passed in. But pickpockets have a brotherhood of their own, and the stranger pickpockets find their way to the resident ones at once; so to keep watch on a strange one who may possibly have entered, the detective, perhaps, allows one or two of the resident gentlemen to go in, and makes them responsible for whatever watches or pocket-books may be lost there on the given night.

The pickpockets so admitted plight him their word that they will not “work” there that night, and they keep it; and if some other pickpocket, still a stranger to the detective, carries on his business there, the resident pickpockets are sorely grieved, for they feel that their honor has been trifled with and imperiled, and they are sure to hunt out the stranger gentlemen, and make him disgorge, on the principle of the honor and respect which one member of their fraternity is bound to show to another. A higher law rules among these people than among the regular or legalized pickpockets in the business world generally. Thus, by wise stratagem, the detective causes one villain to keep another “honest,” or inoffensive at least.

This particular officer is not always at that given post on play nights; but he may be often seen there, and he is a splendid specimen of the *genus* detective. It would be difficult to find in any business vocation a more thoroughly effective and true man than he; but he honors the calling, and not the calling him. Without him and his fellow-detectives the civilization of New York could not be maintained, and throughout the country a sort of anarchy would bear sway. Vigilance committees would be needed in all our cities, and be made up of inexperienced citizens, who, not knowing what to do, would make confusion more confounded, and run riot themselves at last. But the skilled “vigilance committee,” the educated detectives, keep things in order.

On the whole, I am of the opinion that the detective system, with all its crafts and hypocrisies, its “higher law,” or law of “expediencies,” which is constantly breaking in upon common law and the statute law of the States against the compounding of felonies, etc., etc., is, notwithstanding all that may be said against it, one of the very best institutions or features of our corrupt civilization, whether we regard the physical powers or the spiritual powers that be in its midst. It is, at least, the silent, secret, and effective Avenger of the outraged Majesty of the Law when everything else fails, and must fail, to bring certain irregular members of society into order. And if there is any merit in sustaining our corrupt, abominable civilization as it is, then the detective’s value cannot well be overrated. But there are social philosophers who hold that it is a sin to perpetuate things as they are, and who teach that society can never be reformed, and justice rule, protecting the rights of labor against the rapacity of greedy tyrants, etc., etc., until it shall have first become disintegrated in all its present parts, and be reconstructed; that out of the rotten particulars of

which the general whole is now composed nothing worthy can be wrought; and that disintegration cannot come too soon, even if through all possible calamities. In the view of these men the detective system is but a power exercised in an unholy cause; a necessary part of an unnecessary system of wrong. Between the philosophers and the general public I leave the detective system, unwilling to assume to decide for others whether, on the whole, it *fell* from “heaven” or sprang from “hell.”

But while I would not undertake to determine for others the metaphysical (?) question above raised, I feel it proper to add for myself, that although most of my relations with the police during my whole period of office were pleasant enough, so far as my brother officers were concerned (some of whom, indeed, I hold in cordial esteem); yet the duties of my position were frequently obnoxious to my taste and —perhaps I will be pardoned for so expressing myself—to my better nature. My adoption of and continuance in the profession were not acts of choice, or volition, in the sense of what sundry more or less clear-headed theologians call “free agency”; but, rather, the practical expressions or verifications of “forcordination” perhaps, or in other words, the results of the “force of circumstances,” in conflict with which I was powerless; and I felt relieved of a great burden when fate permitted me, at last, to forego my honors as a detective policeman.

McWatters, George. *Knots Untied: Or, Ways and By-Ways in the Hidden Life of American Detectives*. Hartford: Burr and Hyde, 1871 (848 pages).