

A Detective's Sermon

The cell-door in the police station was closed upon a thief who had given his age as seventeen years and looked even younger. He did not look much like a criminal. His clothing and person were clean and his features were of a type indicating intelligence. The brutal expression often noticed in the features of law-breakers was lacking entirely in his. A *New York Tribune* reporter, who saw him locked up, noticed tears in the youth's blue eyes. The detective who had made the arrest had served many years in the police department, and was familiar with the history of many thieves. "That boy ought not to be a thief," he said. "His father is dead, and he has a respectable, hard-working mother, to whom he might be a comfort, instead of a curse. He has been on the island twice already, and now he will go up for burglary."

"What kind of boys become burglars?" the reporter asked.

"All kinds."

"Do good boys ever get to be thieves?"

"Yes, when they fall into bad company."

"What influence do you consider the most powerful in leading boys on to crime?"

"Rum."

"Has not natural depravity much to do with their fall?"

"I do not believe that human depravity is natural," the detective said. "It is unnatural. The lives of the worst criminals in the city prove as much. Did it ever occur to you that there is much less of what you call natural depravity in country places than in the city? People get to be bad because their surroundings are bad, because they cannot resist temptation, because their better instincts are taken away by evil influences. The boy here lives in a tenement house. His mother is poor, and there is not much pleasure for him in the house. So he runs about in the street. If he lived in the country, as I did when I was a boy, he couldn't find much mischief away from home. Here he associates with all kinds of boys, and there is not much wickedness a New York *gamin* does not know about. Every grog-shop which bears a sign 'pool for drinks' is a training school for young thieves. The boys get heated with beer, and are fascinated with the game. They must have money to enjoy the sport, and drink leads them to steal it. This lad began stealing from his poor mother first. She would not have him punished. Then he stole from his employer and was discharged. I caught him picking pockets and sent him to the penitentiary. When he got out he robbed a money drawer in a grocery. Last night he and his 'pals' broke the shutters of a cigar store and carried off a small amount of the stock. After he gets out of prison again he may become a more expert burglar, but his mother will die of a broken heart."

A sob, within the cell, sounded like an expression of assent. The officer noticed it, and turning away from the door he added in a lower tone, "it is the fault of the parents sometimes. If his home life had been made a little better and pleasanter he might have been a steady boy. His

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mother was always complaining and fretting in the house, before he began to steal, and since then she has tried to shield him from the police, while she kept nagging him when they were alone. Boys are growing up to be sober, honest men in the worst tenement houses in the city. You will find as a rule, that they have been taught by their parents to expect punishment for evil-doing and that they have amusements at home.”

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