

AN EXCERPT  
*from*  
*Brilliant*  
**DEDUCTION**

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*The Story of Real-Life  
Great Detectives*

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Published in the United States by Lyon Hall Press, Lakewood, Ohio

[www.brilliantdeduction.info](http://www.brilliantdeduction.info)



PROLOGUE:

# HERCULE POIROT AND H.H. HOLMES



**T**HE DISCOVERY of a counterfeit \$100 James Monroe silver certificate, in 1897, presented a genuine mystery. The U.S. Treasury had printed the notes, featuring the fifth president's likeness, for 19 years with only one slight modification to the design, in 1891. In that time they had never encountered anything as dismaying or confounding as the bill that appeared in Philadelphia in the autumn of 1897. The reproduction was absolutely perfect. No one would have suspected the bill at all if not for the red seal that had been smeared by a chance drop of moisture. Even then, Treasury staff who investigated suspected that only the seal was a fake, added to an otherwise genuine note; though no one could guess at a means or motive for such an act, it seemed more plausible than an entirely flawless counterfeit. Until, that is, someone soaked the entire bill and peeled it apart to expose a two-ply laminated sheet. At that point, the unpleasant fact was no longer possible to deny. Someone was counterfeiting U.S. currency with unimaginable perfection.

But who? And even more puzzling, how? Within the known limits of the day's printing technology, the fake Monroe note was inexplicable. A technique called photo etching could produce an engraved metal printing plate that perfectly duplicated the image of a real Treasury bill. But photo etching only

worked with relatively soft metals, which would wear down far too quickly for a practical counterfeiting operation. The technology for photo etching on something like steel, by contrast, simply didn't exist. The resulting paradox was a mysterious crime of uncommon quality. If the standard for mysteries is the classic "whodunit," and "where have they gone" comprises a simpler version, "how can this be explained at all" represents the detective's greatest challenge. The Monroe note mystery, incorporating all three questions, was tailor made for a real-life great detective to step forward and prove himself.

One operative of the Treasury's Secret Service was more than ready to volunteer. Thirty-six-year-old William J. Burns, in his eighth year as a Secret Service agent, had already proven himself an unusually able investigator in other counterfeiting cases. Yet his proposed answer seemed nearly as unbelievable as the Monroe note mystery itself. Burns declared that someone, somewhere, must have secretly discovered a method for photoengraved steel. The Secret Service, in Operative Burns's view, needed to immediately begin not only investigations in Philadelphia but also a nationwide project of identifying every engraver whose background and ability might permit such a breakthrough. It was a tall order, but the threat posed by this suspected innovation seemed to demand boldness in both thought and action.

Eventually the Secret Service agreed, though only after months of delay, and a new chief to replace the skeptical William Hazen, who had ordered Burns to pursue other, less imaginative angles. With the full backing of Hazen's replacement, however, Burns got his chance. The labyrinthine investigation that followed ultimately revealed puzzles within puzzles. Solving them all required a degree of observation, inventiveness and initiative worthy of the liveliest detective fiction. When the entire story with its locked rooms, red herrings and dramatic discoveries was finally complete, Edward Marshall of *The New York Times* noted without irony that it "Sounds like Sherlock Holmes's work."

Burns delighted in recognition, and judging from some of his later enterprises, he may well have noted Marshall's comparison and thought he liked the sound of it. Which is both a curious and, perhaps, telling reaction, given the subse-

quent history of detectives and celebrity. The Monroe note mystery was by no means the last time William Burns made headlines. Through his even more spectacular subsequent exploits, he became very likely the most famous detective who ever lived. Yet he is almost completely forgotten today, along with nearly all of the men who achieved similar heights in his profession.

History is full of such figures, of course. Entertainers, athletes, explorers, eccentrics; for every celebrity remembered by later generations there are vastly more who were household names once, but barely even constitute trivia today. The transient fame of the great detectives, however, stands in remarkable contrast to the enduring public fascination with their fictional counterparts. The once famous sleuths of real life have not vanished from history's record entirely, but they have undeniably faded into obscurity. The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* features far more detective novelists than actual detectives, despite Britain's nurturing of more than one specimen of note. Of the several thousand profiles in the bio network's online archive precisely one describes a famous detective, and even he is lumped under "Police Officer" for an occupational category. Detectives have fared slightly better in printed media, where most of the field's luminaries have inspired at least one biography; in a few cases a handful. All the same, the name of Burns, or Pollaky, or Vidocq will draw little more than a blank look from the great majority of people who could, by contrast, name detectives of fiction with ease.

The real detectives can boast no public monuments or statues, while the best known of their imaginary auxiliary is the model for at least four. And not only does the latter group account for vastly more space at a typical library—where works of mystery fiction number enough to merit their own separate section almost invariably—more than one of its number has even challenged his historic counterparts with a full-length biography as well.

Meanwhile in the most popular of all modern media, film and television, decade after decade of audiences have shown dependable enthusiasm for made-up cops and private eyes and, significantly, for real criminals and crimes. The long memory of certain infamous crimes and the individuals who committed them, when known, offers a further pointed contrast with general amnesia toward eminent detectives. Films or documentaries about historic

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crimes provide most of the rare occasions when a great detective can enjoy once more the attention of a general audience—yet their very nature as great detectives remains obscured by the fact that crimes and criminals are invariably the featured attraction. A century later, interest remains far higher in both Holmes the fictional crime solver *and* Holmes the real-life criminal, with almost as many works about the notorious Chicago World’s Fair murderer as all of history’s greatest detectives combined.

This waning of detection’s once celebrated names, even as those of detective fiction and real-world crime still flourish, is itself something of an interesting mystery worth examining more closely. This book is an attempt at just such an inquiry, an attempt to recall the names and lives of those figures who once upon a time were every bit as familiar as the invented characters who have succeeded them. A quote from one of the most prominent among those characters summarizes the grounds for the inquiry, as well as the interest it might offer readers. In Agatha Christie’s 1928 novel, *The Mystery of the Blue Train*, the author’s hero delivers this exceptionally confident introduction: “My name is Hercule Poirot,’ he said quietly, ‘and I am probably the greatest detective in the world.’” Devotees of the most famous of all detectives, fictional or otherwise, might take some small offense at this declaration. But Poirot’s boast also invites a second, arguably more legitimate question that has nothing to do with the boundaries of literary universes.

Who are, or were, the indisputably valid, real person candidates for “the greatest detective in the world?”

The question seems obvious once considered, even if the answers are not. Any profession must have its select few who stand out from the ranks. Detectives should be no different, even if most of those elite are now little known. If nothing else, the name of Allan Pinkerton likely prompts some dim recognition from many people even if his life and achievements are a blank. One name suggests the possibility of others, and that the history of detection could include a few more individuals worth remembering, as well. *Brilliant Deduction* represents a humble, but hopefully rewarding attempt to discover some of them. It is certainly not exhaustive, even to the extent that any finite

selection may ever be, even in theory. The detectives featured herein are not an especially diverse lot demographically, though neither was the field of detection in general, for much of its history.

It's worth noting, too, that the notion of a "great detective" offers diverse potential interpretations, and perhaps some of these are left unrepresented as well. Every detective considered in these pages was a smart, capable investigator, but their selection over others who might claim equal or even greater skill is largely a product of fame. This, largely, is simply necessity. The very nature of detection is inherently bound up with discretion, at least within the private detective's sphere. Some detectives found ways to achieve celebrity, both in government and in private practice, but it is more than plausible that a few of the most talented among their peers accomplished equal feats but left little or no record. Their number, inevitably, must remain obscure.

William Burns and other once renowned detectives offer quite enough marvels of deductive reasoning, and even variety, within the limitations noted above. From a Napoleonic-era French polymath, to lawmen of the American West, to a small-town detective who nearly rewrote the history of one of the 20th century's most notorious crimes, the great detectives varied widely in manners and method. They varied in their approach to the fame that accompanied greatness, with some actively seeking it, others shunning it, and more than one ultimately destroyed by it. The differing types of fame they met and ways in which they responded are worth examining, as well. The result should entertain, and perhaps offer a little insight into the mystery of why real-life great detectives dazzled society for more than a century and then vanished, leaving scarcely a trace.

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## CHAPTER ONE

# VIDOCQ

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“Observation is the first rule of investigation.”

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IT WILL GIVE OFFICER LEES rank with Vidocq and Macé,” the *Marin County Journal* boasted in 1880. Isaiah Lees, a San Francisco detective, had solved a mysterious disappearance that had stymied the local sheriff, and in lauding his accomplishment this was the highest praise the writer could offer. The comment itself is an interesting artifact of the field’s history. Within less than a decade, *A Study in Scarlet* would establish Sherlock Holmes as the ultimate company for detectives to seek. But with that convention still in the future, the northern California *Journal* was proposing its man as a peer of two real-life detectives instead.

Both were French. Gustave Macé was director of the French Sûreté in that year, so he would have been in the news for his roles in one or two high profile cases. But why was the other man, a predecessor of Macé who had departed life in 1857, still named as a standard for other detectives a generation later and a quarter of the way around the world? And why has the name of Vidocq since been so completely forgotten outside of his native France?

An explanation of the second question may reveal itself, eventually, through examination of Vidocq and his varied successors. The most direct answer to the first question is, simply, that Vidocq was first.

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Again and again, in nearly every serious examination of detective history, Vidocq's name turns up first. Jurgen Thorwald's *The Century of the Detective*. Angus Hall's *The Crime Busters*. Katherine Ramsland's *History of Forensic Science and Criminal Investigation*. Even biographies of the field's other luminaries often acknowledge Vidocq, at least briefly. Such consistency implies a good reason, and much of it may be found in the 1825 episode of a Monsieur Matthieu.

The Parisian Matthieu was *un millionnaire*. One of his countrymen had invented the very term, a century earlier, and despite economic and political upheaval its essential meaning still held: he was a very rich man, indeed. When police found the wealthy gentleman dead in the grand house he had called home, they had no difficulty establishing a robbery as the likeliest explanation. In addition to Matthieu's well-known wealth, the crime scene suggested a violent struggle; though old, the late Matthieu had been a strong man, and many pieces of his furniture were smashed and broken. Unfortunately, an explanation of robbery offered no help in coming up with suspects. Tracing stolen objects offered little promise, either. As Matthieu had lived by himself in a house stuffed with curiosities and bric-a-brac, it was difficult even to establish what items were missing.

The police's ally and rival Vidocq, founder of the dozen-year-old metropolitan detective department, took all of this in at a glance. Vidocq also took note of blood stains on the door latches and study floor, as well as the staircase. He insisted the stains be preserved, which, though a curious order at the time, now seems an obvious enough action. Vidocq's next moves, however, were just the sort that made him both a legend in his time and a challenge to the credulity of later generations. The relatively respectable detective exchanged his own identity for that of a Monsieur Jules, war veteran, burglar and general purpose thug, who was quite familiar among the outlaws of Paris despite the fact that "Jules" did not exist except as a creation of Vidocq. In this disguise, Vidocq then began trawling the dens and hangouts of Jules's tribe, i.e. criminal society.

After hours of searching grimy bars and cafés, he found a man matching exactly what the crime scene had suggested to his detective's mind: a strong man, keeping disreputable company and, most importantly, very recently

injured in a bloody brawl. Vidocq then casually picked a fight with this man, Richard, and applied his own considerable strength to pummeling him, until finally the owner of the bar summoned the gendarmes. Just as officers arrived to pull them apart, Vidocq reached into his pocket for a clean cloth he had brought and dabbed at a bloody wound that the fight had reopened above the astonished Richard's eye.

Throughout his career, Vidocq studied and experimented with new methods for combating crime, whether organizational, procedural or technical. He had no formal advanced education or scientific training, but Vidocq still kept abreast of discoveries that might prove useful. By 1825, he knew how experiments had shown that an individual person's dried blood, if exposed to certain chemicals, predictably turned different colors: crimson, pink, etc. So he obtained the appropriate materials and conducted tests on the cloth with Richard's blood and on the blood stains leading away from M. Matthieu's study. The results were identical.

This was crude evidence, and at the same time too sophisticated; such testing would not be admissible in a court room for many years. But what a detective can prove is never as important as what he can convince a suspect that he can prove, and Vidocq was as effective in applying this principle as anyone in history. His suspect in the case at hand, Richard, had been taken to jail following the barroom brawl. (The police had to release Vidocq, though many of them longed to throw him in a cell, too.) Vidocq confronted Richard with the blood test results and his reasoning in the case. In combination with the seeming wizardry performed on Richard's blood, Vidocq's confidence and reputation were enough to demolish the thief's hopes of bluffing it out. Richard confessed. The press soon celebrated another coup for Vidocq, and blood analysis in detection, which in lesser hands might have fizzled and set back the cause of innovation, instead got an early start which encouraged further research.

Innovation is hardly unique to Vidocq. The champions of many great detectives of the 19th century always claim some "first" for their subject. Some innovations are claimed more than once; the photographic "rogues' gallery"

is probably the most widely assigned first of them all. Ironically, Vidocq is one of the very few pioneers of detection who has absolutely no claim to the rogues' gallery (the dry plate photography that made it practical arrived only in the last few years of his life). It's a modest enough concession to subsequent colleagues, as the list of methods and systems of detection owed to Vidocq is still remarkable.

Vidocq was the first modern detective in nearly every major sense. He was the first full-time specialist detective. He organized the first public force of such detectives, and the first private detective agency. Arguably, as the author or inspiration of volume after volume of adventure stories, he was even the first fictional detective. Vidocq did not remain alone in the field, but he had a good lead on everyone who followed him and might well have missed more of them entirely, but for his own longevity. Scotland Yard introduced detectives 30 years after Vidocq's *Sûreté*, while Allan Pinkerton's very first accidental, amateur detective work began the same year Vidocq closed his own private detective agency to retire.

In fact Vidocq, though celebrated in his own time, may present an even more remarkable figure today than his contemporaries could have appreciated. Vidocq's many, mostly successful, experiments were novel and interesting to the public in the 1820s. But nearly a century would pass before anyone could examine those clever tricks in the context of established scientific detection. In many ways the epitome of the brilliant lone reasoner since relegated to fictional detective work, Vidocq was at the same time conducting early trials in methodical, scientific approaches: forensic chemistry, ballistics, handwriting analysis, criminology theory. Yet no one could have guessed this at the time.

Even Vidocq himself probably could not imagine the full extent of the extraordinary changes to police work of which he was at the forefront. But until he was nearly 35 years old, Vidocq probably never even imagined that he would make a living from police work, to say nothing of his name and fortune. The career of "detective" did not even exist until he created it. In light of which it seems entirely natural that, like many great detectives who followed, Vidocq arrived at his life's calling only after some unlikely detours along the way.

Eugène Vidocq's eccentric path through life began in humble and ordinary circumstances in the northern French town of Arras. Ordinary, that is, unless one counts the likely embellished accounts setting his nativity against the backdrop of a raging storm, and in the same house where Robespierre was born 17 years before. Or approximately 17 years before. Between exaggeration for dramatic effect by Vidocq and his admirers, exaggeration for less flattering purposes by his detractors, and two centuries of sometimes casually researched histories, the specifics of Vidocq's life are often contested, literally from his first day to his last. It may be that the deliberate man of mystery, who employed a range of disguises and assumed identities even before his career as a detective, would have liked it this way.

In any event, Vidocq was probably born on July 23, 1775, in Arras, where his father baked bread. As a child, little Eugène soon displayed the same energy, curiosity, and aptitude for trouble that would last him his entire life. During the modest formal education offered him, Vidocq was a gifted student and demonstrated great promise. Yet he was one of those children who would never be satisfied being at the front of the pack when his abilities permitted him to dash out far ahead of the pack and explore. Stories that Vidocq was a troublemaker or even something of a bully are certainly plausible. Nearly anything is plausible with Vidocq, except fitting in and conforming to others' expectations. Fortunately for the ambitious baker's son, he was born to a society that was to present him with far greater opportunities than anyone might have expected.

As a young man, Vidocq seriously considered emigrating to America on at least one occasion. Instead, he did not even venture beyond France's borders until much later in life, and the possibilities of an American Vidocq must be left to the imagination. But in one sense the young New World republic did provide opportunity to Vidocq. The American colonists' revolution (and more importantly the enormous debt resulting from the French government's costly role in it) led directly to the first in a series of revolutions and restorations that would regularly convulse France throughout Vidocq's long life. For a man like Vidocq, bored by a structured and predictable existence, it was just the place to be.

And as the *ancien régime* began to give way to experimentation and a dangerous but exciting new France, Vidocq began his own trials of life beyond schoolwork and bread ovens. The results were no doubt much more appealing to a mischievous boy's tastes. Even allowing for some embellishment, the adventures of the adolescent and young adult Vidocq could serve as the very definition of "picaresque." At one point Vidocq ran off with a traveling theatre company. From them he learned the arts of acting and costume, which he would practice long after his brief stage career officially ended. The pugna-cious youth also graduated from fist fights to fencing and pistols; he learned the former well enough to kill a fencing master in a duel fought over a shared romantic interest.

Though only 15 years old, Vidocq faced prison for that mischance. Instead he was sentenced to army service, as the new republican France found its troubles compounded by war with much of Europe and wanted every able man available in uniform. Records of the period show Vidocq's army career marked by acts of skill and valor, but frequent indiscipline as well. Even in a war of revolution, the army was no more a place for Vidocq than the classroom. Vidocq remained with the army anyway, for a few years; when brawling or insubordination, e.g., led to imprisonment, he escaped only to re-enlist elsewhere under an assumed identity. At one point he married, but walked away when it didn't work as hoped. In 1795, he managed to leave his regiment with permission, for once, then set himself up in Brussels as a gambler named Rousseau and decided to extend his presence at the card tables beyond his allotted leave. As he had also taken the liberty of promoting himself to the rank of captain, he was faced with a lengthy prison sentence once again upon being arrested for desertion.

Following his inevitable escape, Vidocq did not re-enlist as he had before. Precisely what he did occupy himself with the next few years, other than evading the law, is open to question. Whatever it was, leaving a clear trail was very likely the last thing he wanted. Vidocq's life in his early twenties seems to have involved these events or something like them: He regularly eluded or escaped police custody, including two escapes from the inescapable Brest prison "the galleys." He may have adopted the identity of a sailor and spent a

year as a “privateer,” or simply a pirate. He also, certainly, became closer and more familiar with the criminal underworld back on land, where his record as an escape artist gave him status.

Along with whatever other lawbreaking Vidocq took a hand in, himself, he also committed forgery, and this charge would prove more difficult to slough off. He alleged the best of excuses, forging a pardon during a prison stint for a poor man whose only crime, in turn, was stealing grain to feed his family. The story seems suspiciously exculpatory, as well as maudlin. Yet it is not entirely implausible. In his later actions and words, Vidocq demonstrated a strong personal sense of justice. When the goal was merely his personal liberty, moreover, he had never found it necessary to employ forgery before.

One way or the other, Vidocq arrived in Lyons around 1799, where the fugitive criminal would first turn criminal catcher. Either voluntarily, or following yet another arrest, in Lyons Vidocq met with fate in the form of an unusually open-minded police commissaire, Jean-Pierre Dubois. Examining the young vagabond’s record, Dubois decided that Vidocq had not actually committed any serious crimes and could serve society far more usefully than by filling a prison cell. Dubois elected instead to “turn” Vidocq, in the language of spies, and employ him as an informer on the underworld in which he had achieved status and familiarity. A busy and effective period of undercover work followed. Vidocq was not yet a detective, but he was on his way.

That way remained winding and indirect. After several months, Vidocq the police spy was unmade by his own success: in order to secure an important conviction he had to appear personally in court, and subsequently Lyons became too hot for informing, even with Vidocq’s facility with disguise. Dubois did his best for his compromised agent. He provided Vidocq with papers identifying him as an itinerant peddler, and thus with some security against being arrested simply for vagrancy. But Dubois could do nothing to efface the forgery charge. So Vidocq returned to an uncertain life, traveling the underworld of criminals and other outcasts evading the notice of authority.

Vidocq’s travels brought him to Paris, eventually—perhaps inevitably, for at the turn of the 19th century the Parisian underworld was nearly as large and

as shadowy as any has ever been. Compared with the City of Light that greets modern tourists, even the nicer parts of Paris were often dark and dangerous, 200 years ago. In very real ways the French capital in which a fugitive Vidocq at last found redemption was still a medieval city. Alistair Horne declares in *Seven Ages of Paris* that as Napoleon was rising to power, “Paris now smelt more of filthy mud and sewage than she had at the worst moments of the Middle Ages,” and was more poorly lit than in the time of Louis XIV. At night the darkness was broken only by flickering candles or lamps, or, given the constant unrest in the city, torches. Years of fires, mobs, unruly soldiers and unstable government had done the great city no favors. Streets were mud, buildings vandalized and defaced, inflation spiraling. Despite all this, Paris continued to expand with new arrivals, though like Vidocq many were at the far fringes of what remained of law abiding, respectable society. In this was both a peril and an opportunity, and Vidocq was about to seize it firmly.

By 1809, Vidocq was settled into a modestly prosperous and comfortable niche. He kept a small shop selling dry goods, and had a home with a woman named Annette, which they shared with his widowed mother. It was, in many ways, improbably like the life back home in Arras that he had turned away from 20 years before. Just like life in Arras, it was not for Vidocq, but it was about to change again.

And just like any significant event in Vidocq’s life, there are multiple versions to choose among, any or all of which may be true in part or in whole. All the different stories imply that Vidocq was still keeping up some measure of association with the criminal underworld. The dramatic version involves Vidocq discovering, through those connections, the name behind a jewelry heist committed against the Empress Josephine, upon which Vidocq gallantly recovered the Empress’s necklace and brought the thief to justice, winning Napoleon’s personal commendation and assignment to continued efforts against crime. A more likely explanation for Vidocq’s second try at police work is that he was under direct or implied threat of blackmail by other denizens of the underworld who knew his history. (Or, perhaps, he was simply bored and tired of a life structured around avoiding attention, so wholly contrary to his nature.) He had endured the confinement of a fugitive’s life for years and

must have longed to dispense with it for good. With that in mind, Vidocq probably brought himself to the attention of authorities before someone else could do so, and offered to resume the informing efforts that had impressed the authorities in Lyons.

The result: Vidocq sent back behind prison walls. Vidocq remained in prison this time, probably longer than all of his previous stays combined. He spent the greater part of two years among Paris's convicts, but not because he had lost his touch or found La Forre prison to be even more secure than the dreaded "galleys." Instead he chose to remain there. Vidocq's second effort at informing started within the prison system, which, like much of America's prison system today, was itself an active part of criminal networks.

Vidocq had found an interested audience for his offer of assistance, once again. The Parisian authorities' existing resources and methods were simply overwhelmed by a burgeoning population and disrupted social order. With so many able young men pressed into Napoleon's huge conscript armies, and the remaining police resources stretched even further by demands to contain antigovernment activity, offers of subverting the criminal ranks from within could not be easily dismissed. And so the divisional chief, "Papa" Henry, sent Vidocq to prison, and Vidocq (perhaps giving weight to the suggestion that other volunteer informants were threatening to return him there anyway) went along with the plan.

Eventually Vidocq was re-assigned back "outside" to spy on Paris's *demi-monde*, a long prison spell having burnished his relevant credentials, except as an escape artist. Henry and the police were still struggling and continued to find their undercover agent's reports a welcome assistance. But Vidocq had been through all this already, once before. Though he had so far avoided the fate of his earlier employment in Lyons, the career of an informer was always vulnerable. Perhaps it was with this in mind that he began lobbying for larger (and more durable) roles on a regular basis.

The freelance police spy had no shortage of ideas to offer. Central to all of them was a citywide, "at large" police force, which would elevate his informing work from a sideline to a dedicated independent organization, commensurate with surveillance of the entire underworld membership. The

need was plainly there. Traditional police forces were still too small, and too Balkanized, while the criminal underworld was an expansive and fluid society whose members were as yet unchecked by any sort of effective system of identification or records. Vidocq himself had exploited these deficiencies as a fugitive, and now believed he was the best man to solve them. If the old ways were inadequate, it seemed obvious that the problems of policing called for new ways, and a new kind of policeman.

One episode from 1810, shortly after Vidocq left La Forre prison and began operating out on the streets, indicates how his thinking was already working along the lines of a detective's. Checking in on a sometimes thief named Hotot whom he had befriended, Vidocq made a mental note of the man's very wet clothes and muddy boots. As heavy rains had soaked Paris earlier that day, Vidocq thought it worth investigating what business had drawn Hotot outdoors in such bad weather. Learning of a burglary at a count's house in the midst of a remodeling, Vidocq visited the scene along with some of the gendarmes. There, in the garden mud, he found the clear prints of hobnailed boots, which could have been those of Hotot.

In later years, perhaps with this case in mind, Vidocq made plaster casts a standard item in the detective's toolkit. Lacking convenient access to that option in this instance, he improvised instead. Persuading a couple of the gendarmes to keep watch over the boot prints, he paid another call on Hotot's billet to share a few bottles of strong wine. After drinking Hotot under the table, Vidocq helped himself to the man's boots and returned to the crime scene for a direct comparison with the garden prints. Hotot shortly found himself under arrest, and, confronted with the evidence Vidocq had outlined for the police, he confessed to the burglary and gave up the loot. They were early days, still, but Vidocq clearly had ideas to transform the old approaches to policing on his mind.

He had to be patient with them; even under an ambitious emperor actively transforming all of French society, police authorities remained slow and reactive by nature. But they were open-minded, or simply desperate, enough to continue giving Vidocq chances, and he continued making the most of them. Vidocq gradually managed to recruit other agents and employ them under his

own supervision, training them in the rules and techniques for observation that he had developed through long experience. Within a few years of his first approach to “Papa” Henry, Vidocq had nearly all of the pieces for a new kind of city-wide specialist police, except formal recognition.

The methods employed by Vidocq in his informing work, and later in establishing the first detective police force, were at their core simple and even obvious. Most of Vidocq’s theories about how to combat crime proceeded from *observation*; his truly important contributions to policing and detection were to be found not so much in theory, but in practice. As Vidocq phrased it, “the detective who won convictions saw and listened, then utilized anything he learned that was out of the ordinary and aroused his suspicions.” From this common sense beginning follow certain basic challenges: being in a position to see and listen, and knowing what to look and listen for. To address both of these problems, Vidocq firmly believed that it was essential to employ the kind of person who could mingle with criminals and understand their ways naturally. In other words, those who were themselves criminals, or at least former criminals. This was Vidocq’s own background, after all, and it succeeded for him. He never believed that any true outsider to the underworld could be as effective as someone with a criminal record, and he considered the latter a basic qualification when selecting his agents. The authorities never entirely accepted this part of Vidocq’s system, unsurprisingly. One Vidocq was acceptable but a whole such squad seemed too risky, even with Vidocq’s shrewd judgment of character, and simply inappropriate as well. But Vidocq was insistent on the old aphorism: to catch a thief, set a thief.

His approach to infiltrating criminal enterprises had a further important dimension, however: disguise. Given Vidocq’s enthusiasm for assumed identities and even the larger habit of personal reinvention throughout his life, this tactic may have been as much a product of his own nature as a solution arrived at through need. Still, his ready use of disguise fed into, and on, his emphasis on observation. A disguise aided the act of observation, of course. And, though Vidocq would have learned some of his technique from his brief sojourn with the players’ company, as a youth, he noted that the real key to

making an adopted identity convincing was, itself, observation: watching how different types of people move, noting their clothing and gestures, listening to their way of speech, until one could reproduce these small details convincingly.

Vidocq's effectiveness in disguising his identity was, all the same, one technique he could never really teach to another, which only helped make it a lasting part of his personal legend. By nature, he was hardly a naturally anonymous figure. Of modest height, around five feet six inches, he was broad and solid as a stone wall, with massive shoulders and a large, leonine head. Yet he could create an array of distinct, convincing identities from this template because his approach to disguise was holistic, rather than dependent on costume: a roughneck sailor; a scarred, sullen gypsy; on occasion even a (very sturdy) old peasant woman. One famous legend had Vidocq so well established in an assumed identity that he was approached for his help in carrying out an ambush—on Vidocq.

As has been noted, Vidocq's own mastery of shifting identities made him acutely aware of the problem represented by his criminal quarries' adroitness at the same game. Before photography, fingerprinting, or coordinated national law enforcement, the small scale but habitual criminal needed no great skill with disguise to thwart identification; regular movement and adoption of false names were often enough. Vidocq attacked this problem, too, first and foremost from the principle of observation. Gifted with a prodigious memory, Vidocq kept mental "profiles" of a large network of thieves, vagabonds, con artists, etc., which he was constantly expanding through his undercover roles. He also continued visiting the prisons after his stay in La Forre, to study the faces of inmates so reoffenders might be recognized even under an assumed name.

But Vidocq also worked to develop systems that were not dependent on one man or extraordinary powers of recall. A written, searchable record of the information in his own head was the first step. Names, ages, aliases; physical characteristics and sometimes drawings; even histories and habits, for Vidocq believed that career criminals often gave themselves away just through their methods and routines. Compared with modern, networked digital resources, mere drawers of indexed file cards seem practically Neolithic. But guided by

Vidocq's insistence on accuracy and detail, his files quickly became a resource trusted and envied by the established police, even those who distrusted Vidocq himself.

These varied ideas finally won a measure of official imprimatur, along with an office to house the file card database, and a staff to make use of it. By late 1812, the ministry of police was ready to overrule the protests of local commissaires and approve Vidocq's plans for a formal, city-wide plain clothes police force. The Brigade de la Sûreté was officially established by the government of Napoleon Bonaparte, just returning from his catastrophic invasion of Russia; fortunately the Sûreté would prove a much more sound initiative.

Setting up offices on Petite rue Sainte-Anne near the main police headquarters, Vidocq's Brigade began modestly, as little more than formalization of the network of agents he was already managing by that point. The first eight employees were, per Vidocq's policy, all men with criminal records. But the Brigade's numbers soon began to grow, and the additions included a few men transferred from the uniformed police, as well as clerks to manage the expanding file system. Even with these resources, Vidocq remained personally active in tackling crimes that came under the Brigade's purview. Like his Emperor, in this regard, Vidocq was determined to manage affairs from the top and play a direct role on the front lines as well. With actual authority rather than an off-the-books, officially deniable auxiliary role, he was at last ready to commence his own career; he was no longer a mere informer, but something entirely new: a detective. He must have relished each opportunity to compete directly with the older uniformed force and show off the effectiveness of his Brigade, his methods, and himself. He certainly loved to promote his successes, particularly in cases where the regular police had been at a loss.

One such case was that of a "notorious" thief, named Fossard. His larceny had reached such a scale as to project above the fog of anonymity that Vidocq was just beginning to dispel. Police knew who Fossard was and even what he looked like, and wanted him badly, but had nonetheless failed to find him. Vidocq took up Fossard's trail, in not one, but two of his trademark disguises;

exactly the sort of unprofessional theatrics that made critics roll their eyes and frown. Vidocq's methods, however, had the merit of producing results. Thus, one should hesitate at least before dismissing as outlandish Vidocq's decision to dress up as an old "eccentric" (perhaps part of the role was not exactly acting) with pigtail, three-cornered hat, and cane. Or his insistence on wandering the streets in this outfit for a time, simply to establish the role. For, once Vidocq had done so to his satisfaction, he began making roundabout inquiries after Fossard, which quickly led to information the police had sought for months.

Visiting a seamstress, Vidocq claimed to be a forsaken husband seeking his runaway wife. Then, in case it helped, he gave a description of the companion who had led her astray. Regarding this curious, pitiful old figure, the seamstress freely confirmed that she had seen such a man; when her visitor broke into tears the seamstress even shared an address the man had left. Drying his eyes and thanking her profusely, the old fellow shuffled away, not breaking character until much later. Perhaps it was excessive, but Vidocq had the address of Fossard's house all the same.

Exchanging his wardrobe, Vidocq then adopted the role of a humble coal man in order to observe the house without drawing attention. In this guise he was able to see Fossard return home. Once convinced that the wanted thief was not going back out again, Vidocq arranged a squad of gendarmes to join him in raiding the upstairs apartment after nightfall. Catching Fossard with his pants down—literally if the story is unembellished—Vidocq succeeded in bringing in both a much wanted man and a small treasure in cash and stolen jewels.

Dramatic episodes like the capture of Fossard made for fine stories, then as now. But even as Vidocq's promotion allowed him more opportunities for personal accomplishment than had his subordinate role as an informer, it placed more responsibility on him as well. Vidocq was directing his own department and was expected to produce more than amusing tales of his exploits. The Brigade de la Sûreté was approved and funded, against the doubts and objections of many in the established police forces, to make a real difference in a citywide crime problem. And the doubters were more than ready to belittle anything less than a complete triumph.



**Eugène François Vidocq, engraving by Marie-Gabriel Coignet**

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The doubters were to be disappointed. The Brigade de la Sûreté was not an overnight success. But its modest early achievements, led by Vidocq's tireless personal efforts, kept it going long enough for this new type of police force to prove its value. In 1817, Vidocq and the dozen agents by then in his employ arrested more than 800 thieves, swindlers and murderers. Faced with this relentless assault, the enemy in this war on crime soon appeared to be not only losing, but losing the will to fight. For *The Vidocq Dossier*, Samuel Edwards examined the records of the period and concluded that "by 1820, eight years after the founding of the Brigade de la Sûreté, the crime rate of Paris had been reduced by an astonishing 40 percent, and the Sûreté was responsible for most of the credit."

This type of success brought a variety of rewards, not the least of which was continued employment as governments rose and fell. In 1813, Vidocq's achievements were already enough for Napoleon to recognize him with a letter of commendation, medal, and cash bonus, as well as an expansion of the Brigade's authority to a national scale, with branch offices soon following in Brest, Toulon, Lyons and, perhaps a particularly proud moment for Vidocq, his home town of Arras. Within a year, however, Napoleon's victorious foes had exiled him to Elba. Suddenly, the former emperor's glowing support was no longer such an enviable asset.

But Vidocq could point to his record as evidence of earning his position with the Sûreté through merit, rather than through imperial patronage of a crony whom the new government could replace with no consequence. He did exactly that, without much care for modesty; according to Edwards "the returning Bourbons were greeted by a flood of pamphlets enumerating the triumphs of the Sûreté National." The new government was apparently satisfied with Vidocq just as the old government had been, and further reward followed. In May 1817, Vidocq received an official pardon for the forgery committed years before, thanks to his continued successes and some lobbying by his growing circle of friends

Vidocq handled relations with France's politicians and power brokers nearly as deftly as his work at the opposite end of the social continuum, on the whole, despite lacking the traditional background, and perhaps even the

typical motivations, of a courtier. Vidocq had many interests but personal involvement in political intrigues was simply not among them. He had found work that was interesting and meaningful to him and that satisfied his taste for adventure and drama, and his main interest in governments was that as his employer they allowed him to keep doing his job. Vidocq was not entirely detached from the nobility and other men of affairs. As his reputation grew, some of them turned to him for discreet help with awkward problems, such as extricating them from a potential scandal they had foolishly gotten into. In solving such matters, usually trivial to him, Vidocq made friends who helped secure his pardon and keep him in office as government succeeded government. By earning the respect of France's elite while leaving politics to them, Vidocq remained on the job through Napoleon, Louis XVIII, Charles X, and Louis Philippe, a relatively rare accomplishment that even the master political survivor Talleyrand might have regarded with approval.

By the middle of the 1820s Vidocq's force, with branch offices extending its activity across much of France, had expanded to 120. The uniformed police chafed at this upstart and grumbled that the former criminals of the Sûreté were still working both sides of the law, their chief included. A few of his hires did betray Vidocq's trust, over the years. But far more often he proved an effective judge of men, both as a detective and as an employer.

The 1820s were a high point of Vidocq's detective career, when he solved most of the cases that would be studied and celebrated in subsequent accounts of his work. In addition to his experiment with blood evidence in 1825, he also won admirers in the 1823 Sénart Forest Affair. Learning of a planned stagecoach robbery, Vidocq turned the expected ambush inside-out. The coach set off packed with police, who then captured a very surprised band of highwaymen. In his biography of the detective, Philip John Stead remarks that the scene "became famous in the print-shops, the great coach drawn up, the police firing, sabers flashing too, and Vidocq amid the throng at the coach door in his caped overcoat." Vidocq's 1821 search for another team of roadway brigands, who had robbed a butcher named Fontaine and only left the man alive through carelessness, was another classic. The case featured a cryptic fragment

of writing, Vidocq calling on his extensive knowledge of criminal affairs to spin a web around his suspects, and a reappearance of Vidocq's alter ego Jules. The story ended with the sort of flourish Vidocq savored; one of the suspects, despairing of hope that he could deceive the seemingly omniscient detective, confessed to an entirely unrelated murder before his interrogator explained that Fontaine's murder was the crime under discussion. (The chagrined outlaw then gave up his role in that, as well.)

The untangling of the murder of the Comtesse d'Arcy was perhaps the most impressive detective work of Vidocq's 1820s triumphs, or else a close second to the case of M. Matthieu. When the young Isabelle d'Arcy was found in bed, killed by a bullet to the forehead, police immediately arrested her much older husband. Though he vigorously protested his innocence, they kept the Comte in jail, yet they could find no real proof to proceed with charges against him. Finding themselves at a stalemate, police reluctantly turned the case over to Vidocq's Sûreté.

Vidocq had little use for the police's theory. He believed the Comte's character made him an unrealistic murder suspect and considered the Comtesse's Italian lover, a man named Deloro, a more promising lead. Beneath his showmanship, however, Vidocq was generally very methodical in pursuing a case. So he started his investigation with the official prime suspect. Police had seized a set of dueling pistols, the Comte's only known firearms, and Vidocq examined these. Neither showed any sign of recent firing, though, as he noted in his report, the killer might have cleaned the murder weapon after use. Therefore Vidocq pursued this lead even further. In fact, he pursued it beyond the strict boundaries of the law by quietly recruiting a physician friend to dig the bullet out of the late Comtesse's skull. Autopsies remained officially taboo in France—even decades after the Revolution—but Vidocq was by no means the last detective to bend the rules. In this case he found the risk justified. Though somewhat deformed by impact, the bullet was clearly too large for the barrels of the Comte's pistols.

Satisfied of the prime suspect's innocence, the Sûreté chief then turned his mind to Deloro. By this point, Vidocq had officially employed a number of women for a few years. The practice provided material for a number of

salacious rumors, unsurprisingly. His first move in the investigation of Deloro did nothing to dispel these. He hired an actress—a profession still considered disreputable, just by itself, at the time—to “get close to” Deloro. Tall, slim and redheaded, Vidocq’s agent was much the same type as the Italian’s late mistress and, within days, was set up in the same role.

Unfortunately for Deloro, when next he went out his new friend promptly opened his apartment to her employer. He proceeded with a thorough search of the lodgings despite having no warrant—this was another detail of the law that Vidocq sometimes overlooked. He therefore concluded this unofficial search with all possible dispatch upon discovering a large pistol and a concealed stash of jewelry. Racing to the jail, he showed the jewelry to the Comte, who identified the pieces as gifts to his wife. Then it was back to his office, where Vidocq found the pistol from Deloro’s apartment a much better match for the fatal bullet.

Vidocq, more sure of his case than ever, was still on very shaky ground when it came to proving that case. Deloro was no poorly educated brigand, and at least one piece of more legitimate evidence would be reassuring before Vidocq tried to frighten his suspect into confessing. From one source or another, Vidocq had discovered that Deloro had been fencing jewelry for some time, and indeed had no other visible source of income. Enter Jean-Louis, another of Vidocq’s long running alter egos, in this case an old Breton and sometime fence. Visiting another member of that essential underworld trade, who was well known for purchasing unconventionally obtained jewelry, Jean-Louis claimed to be seeking Deloro to collect on money he had borrowed. The other fence allowed that Signor Deloro had been in a few days earlier and sold a diamond ring. Obviously, no questions had been asked, but selling jewelry to a known receiver of stolen goods was hardly a badge of innocence.

With this last piece of information, Vidocq discarded his disguise and returned to the apartment to confront his suspect. Deloro, probably not a particularly brave man, quickly crumbled like so many others when barraged by this confident detective who seemed to know everything. Yes, Deloro confessed, he did it. He murdered the Comtesse and stole her jewelry to keep himself in funds.

Charged with the murder, Deloro was eventually convicted and sent to the guillotine. The Comte d'Arcy, promptly released following Deloro's confession, became another well-placed proponent of Vidocq and the Sûreté. And ballistics science, from rough beginnings like these, gradually received more attention from science and law enforcement following its role in one of Vidocq's celebrated adventures.

As the Sûreté approached its 15th birthday, its larger record of achievements, as well as Vidocq's personal accomplishments and his gift for public relations, had won many friends and admirers. But two significant exceptions remained unappreciative of the poacher-turned-gamekeeper's work. The first, naturally enough, was the criminal society whose trade Vidocq had done so much to disrupt. The second, in an unlikely concord, was the traditional police forces. And, as Edwards notes in *The Vidocq Dossier*, the latter's resentment was not so much in spite of Vidocq's effective campaigns as it was *because of* them:

His success, however, caused problems that would haunt him throughout his career. He had triumphed where the uniformed police of the Prefecture had failed, and they were jealous of him. Their hatred grew as he expanded his activities and they never forgave him for accomplishing what they could not do.

So when Vidocq abruptly resigned on June 20, 1827, no one believed it was an entirely voluntary act. Particularly in view of its closely following the arrival of a new chief at the Police Prefecture, who had assailed the Sûreté with criticism and interference constantly since taking office. To the extent that Vidocq's resignation was, in some sense, by choice, it was almost certainly a choice made in response to the new administration's hostility.

Not quite 52 years old, Vidocq's somewhat early "retirement" failed to slow him down in any appreciable way. Even while busily building up and directing the Sûreté as well as personally pursuing cases himself, Vidocq had maintained a full life outside of police work. Especially when it came to romantic life. Just as he kept up with the activities of seemingly every thug, thief and con man

in Paris, Vidocq also seemed to maintain a comprehensive mental directory of every attractive single woman in the city. His biographers make no pretense of denying that Vidocq was intimately acquainted with a great many of those women, too, despite spending most of his adult life married.

Vidocq's first, abandoned marriage was eventually ended officially with a divorce. Annette, for a number of years his mistress and occasionally a partner in clandestine surveillance, disappeared too from his life at some point. In 1820 Vidocq wed for a second time, to Jeanne-Victoire Guerin. Sadly, his young bride became sick with rheumatic fever just two years into their marriage and died aged 24. Just one month later, his mother followed his wife in death, and friends urged Vidocq to rest, but he rebuffed their advice. Insisting that "the underworld never rests, so I cannot afford a holiday," Vidocq dealt with his grief by plunging into work instead. After a few years, however, he married once more, and for Vidocq the third try proved to be the charm. Around age 50, Vidocq returned to Arras and married his young cousin Fleuride Maniez. Vidocq was never entirely faithful, but he and Fleuride seemed to have a genuine bond. Vidocq did change his habits, too, at least in some ways, becoming more of an administrator around this time and reducing the front line role played in his best known adventures as a detective.

He collected many of those adventures, after his resignation from the Sûreté, into his influential *Memoirs*. The exact relationship between Vidocq and the *Memoirs* is uncertain. Most modern authorities believe its tales to be significantly fictionalized and probably in part written by one of Vidocq's friends among the literati, possibly Honoré de Balzac. One account suggests that Vidocq himself "utterly repudiated" the book, afterward, as a fabrication. Whether themselves fictional or not, though, the *Memoirs* of Vidocq enormously influenced the subsequent genre of detective fiction. They were the beginning of years of popular novels, stories and plays about or inspired by Vidocq. They were a considerable influence on the work of later authors including Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle, also, whose works in turn laid the foundation of the detective story in English language literature.

Meanwhile, even as Vidocq purchased and settled into an estate in Saint-Mandé with his new bride, his mind was never far from real-world crime,

either. He had always considered a proactive approach to crime at least as important as effective detection, going so far as to declare that “a repressive police that is never preventive is a monstrosity.” Now he had time to devote more energies to preventive tactics, and, as with detection, he saw much promise in technological innovation. Vidocq, or perhaps specialists working at his direction, experimented with ways to create a more secure lock, as well as secure paper and ink to deter fraud; patent royalties for the latter eventually produced significant income for the one-time forger. Having struggled for years to free himself of that forgery charge, Vidocq also retained much sympathy for the ex-convict who faced harsh discrimination if he or she aspired to go straight. To provide some job opportunities for ex-cons, Vidocq spent some of his retirement and a great deal of money trying to start a box factory, although in the end he had to write off the venture as a loss.

Throughout the years following Vidocq’s departure from the Sûreté, he also remained in contact with many of the underworld sources he had cultivated, and passed occasional information along to the authorities. Vidocq still had friends at the Sûreté, and probably even one or two in the uniformed police. In any event, his tips were not turned away. Law enforcement had found itself hard pressed to make up for the absence of Vidocq, and as the latest revolution stirred up social unrest once more in 1830, authorities found increasingly frequent uses for the semi-retired detective. After the office of police prefect changed hands again, the new man, Gigquet, made Vidocq’s return to work official. Vidocq returned to his old job directing the Brigade de la Sûreté, with the additional status of a deputy prefect.

Yet for various reasons Vidocq did not last as the Orléans government’s troubleshooter; he would have a second act as a detective, but it did not play out at the Sûreté. He retired from the department he had founded a second and final time, November 15, 1833. Rumors suggested a return to crime by one or more of the ex-convicts Vidocq employed as having played a part, and Prefect Gigquet did ordain a clean record policy for the Sûreté and all police agencies the same year. Vidocq, by contrast, never wavered in his insistence on the value of firsthand knowledge of crime, believing that without it a detective force was neutered. His second retirement was nonetheless much more his

own choice, per most accounts, and relatively amicable on both sides. Samuel Edwards suggests that Vidocq may have been less motivated by a disagreement with his employer and, instead, more motivated by opportunities elsewhere. The always ambitious Vidocq could see tremendous possibilities in rapidly industrializing France's growing prosperity, and craved greater participation than his demanding government job would allow. So Vidocq, who had built the prototype public detective force, now established another pattern followed by many of his successors: parlaying a successful government career into a more lucrative private practice.

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