

Vidocq: Convict Turned Detective Magnifique

By Joseph Geringer

Master Criminologist

"The shortness of life cannot dissuade us from its pleasures, nor console us from its pains."

Marquis de Vauvenargues

Throughout history, legends abound of citizens taking it upon themselves to fight local crime and criminals in a splendid number of ways; most of these stories are fictionalized accounts of actual people whose real lives were more mundane than the heroic poems and songs that lauded them; chief among these is England's Sir Robin of Locksley (Robin Hood). It was not until the early Nineteenth Century, however, that a Frenchman a one-time criminal himself utilized his first-hand knowledge of his country's underworld to create a whole new, formalized entity called "criminal investigation". In doing so, Eugene Francois Vidocq brought crime fighting to a higher plateau, up from a disorganized and often-negative milieu and into a social science.

Yet, unlike so many others whose achievements nowhere exact those of Vidocq's, he is little known in the world today. Outside the files of the Surete the detective bureau of the French police that he helped create, he is rarely recognized.

The Vidocq Society, a precise consortium of forensic and law-enforcement professionals whose practices are based on the teachings of Vidocq, lists the master detective's credits as many. Besides holding the honor as the Suretes first appointed chief (1811), the Vidocq:

- introduced record-keeping (a card-index system), criminalistics and the science of ballistics into police work.
- was the first to make plaster-of-paris casts of foot and shoe impressions.
- was a master of disguise and surveillance.
- held patents on indelible ink and unalterable bond paper.
- and founded the first modern detective agency and credit bureau, Les Bureau des Renseignements.

After his directorship in the Suret, the latter "gave him the necessary tools...to eventually set himself up as quite possibly the world's first bona fide private eye," writes Axiom Investigative Consultants' history web page. "His agency was a tremendous success, building a reputation in the best traditions of detective fiction."



Eugene Francois Vidocq, 1829

Vidocq's factual successes inspired world-class authors who borrowed his brilliance to embody their fictional heroes. Doyles' Sherlock Holmes character is much based on Vidocq; so are both Jean Valjean and Inspector Javert in Hugo's *Les Miserables*. Dickens mentions Vidocq in *Great Expectations*; Melville cites him in *Moby Dick*; and Poe refers to Vidocq's methods in *Murders in the Rue Morgue*. And there are more beyond these.

Crowning his triumphs was Eugene Francois Vidocq's value for his fellow man. "He was a philanthropist who helped the poor and abandoned of Paris," says the Vidocq Society. "At the same time that he was pursuing the guilty, he was also freeing the innocent."

Fugitive, undercover agent, chief of detectives, private investigator, author, inventor and humanitarian all these personalities combine to produce one of the most amazing biographies of one of the most amazing men in the history of criminal pursuit.

"Just as his behavior irritated the conventional police, his personal behavior was frowned upon by the conventional people who did not have his sheer love of life," writes Philip John Stead in [Vidocq, *Picaroon of Crime*]. "(He preferred) the tumultuous life of danger to the contentment of security. His story is one long swashbuckling adventure as he breaks out of jails, pursues actresses, duels to the death, raids the hells of criminals and stalks the Paris night in a thousand disguises."

Such was Vidocq a rare talent, a rare man.

The engravings that accompany this story are taken from one of the earliest English translations (1859) of Vidocq's *Memoirs*. They are by the famous Cruikshank, who is best known for his illustrations of many first publications for Charles Dickens and his Victorian contemporaries.

"Youth is a continual intoxication; it is the fever of reason."

La Rochefoucauld

"I was born at Arras (France); my continual disguises, the flexibility of my features, and a singular power of grimacing, having cast some doubt concerning my age, it will not be superfluous to declare here, that I was brought into the world on the 23rd of July, 1775, in a house adjoining that in which Robespierre was born sixteen years before." Thus begins Eugene Francois Vidocq's *Memoirs*. "It was night; the rain fell, lightning flashed, the thunder rolled; and a relation, who was both midwife and fortune-teller, predicted that my career would be a stormy one."

Much of Vidocq's printed reminiscences were, by his own admission, dramatized by an unscrupulous ghostwriter to sell a book. We will get into that later, but, for now, it might be advantageous at this point to clarify that the above prediction turned out to be very accurate. Vidocq's chain of life's adventures *was* stormy.

The son of a solid-tempered baker and doting mother, there was little in Vidocq's genetics that perpetuated a rascalion. Yet, little Eugene was a trouble-making child, preferring raising a fist to learning his studies. Catholic, the good nuns who tried to teach him that a peace-loving boy is a happy boy, were constantly reminded that their instructions went nowhere. Their pupil was not a bad boy, they conceded, and he was always an honest child, but he simply loved the intrigue and disposition of adventure. Schoolhouse studies bogged him down; slate board arithmetics and geographies kept him from dreaming of wilder times and less-placid places outside sleepy old medieval Arras.



Young Vidocq escapes (Engraving by Cruikshank)

Accidentally killing his fencing instructor at the age of 14, he ran away from home and an unsympathetic constabulary. He had planned to voyage to the Americas, but lost his saved money to a young actress who turned his head so far that the teenager lost all vision of common sense. Instead, he joined the Bourbon Regiment.

The company of battle-hardened ruffian soldiers would have intimidated most youngsters his age, but Vidocq found their quarrelsome attitudes his kind of company. "(Vidocq) had taken to the army," says biographer Philip John Stead in *Vidocq, Picaroon of Crime*. "In the first six months he fought fifteen duels with saber or *epee* and killed some of his opponents...He had hung about the fencing schools to good purpose when he should have been delivering bread to his father's customers."

In melees against the invading Austrians, the boy distinguished himself in his corps; he soon earned a promotion to the rank of Corporal of Grenadiers. Off the battlefield, he continued to become embroiled in duels, and when an insulting and cowardly sergeant-major refused to meet him in honor, Vidocq struck the man, a superior a hanging offense. Facing a court-martial, and quite possibly a noose, he deserted camp and made his way home to Arras.

By then, 1792, what historians would later call "the French Revolution" had begun. (It would be the first of many governmental upheavals that Vidocq would witness in his lifetime.) Citizen revolutionaries had dethroned tyrannical Louis XVI and beheaded his Marie Antoinette; gaols throughout France crammed with now-removed *aristocratie* waiting to share their king's fate. Non-discriminatory, the "Reign of Terror" brought both male and female gentry to the executioner's axe or the terrible instrument of decapitation named after its inventor, Joseph Guillotine.

While in Arras, Vidocq spotted three dragoons dragging a couple of frightened women prisoners to the chopping block at the Place de la Comedie. Incensed by their lack of gallantry, the boy unsheathed his cutlass and took on the trio of soldiers, slaying them while the women fled. Spectators found the duel thrilling, but not so the Citizen-Represented Courte de Inquirité who didn't approve of the 17-year-old's uninvited defense of convicted *noblesse*. He quickly found himself in the town gaol, awaiting the same unpalatable fate as the women he saved.

Only by the intervention of his father was young Eugene saved. Luckily, the baker was a loyal supporter of the peoples' cause and persuaded one of the leading Citizen families, the Chevaliers, to vouch for his son. Vidocq was released and, once free, he visited the patronizing Chevaliers. Befriending them, he soon enamored the daughter of the household, Louise. Unchaperoned moonlight walks through ancient Arras eventually brought the hand-clasping teens to the Chevalier stables where, on haystack, they ventured beyond handholding. Louise soon announced she was pregnant.

Vidocq considered returning to the road, but the family's sponsor, Magistrate Lebon, dampened his wandering spirit by proclaiming should he set one foot across town limits more than bread would be in his bread basket by morning. Throughout his life, Vidocq considered himself a rational creature; even now, when he was still in his rascally years, he understood common sense. He married the girl in a Catholic ceremony in Arras.

Wedded bliss it was not. First, his bride announced on wedding night that her pregnancy was a ruse. Second, the adventure-loving Vidocq was now forced to resort to the life of a grocer (his father had set him up in a store) and it peppered him to hear the drum-rolls of other men marching off to war and derring-do. That perennial stretch of road out of town lured.

Option for escape presented itself one evening when he returned from the shop earlier than usual and spied an officer of the Seventeenth Chasseurs slipping from the bedroom window, naked Louise planting a kiss on the soldier's cheek. Stepping into his home only long enough to pack, and to tell his stunned wife what he thought of her evening habits, Vidocq bid *adieu* to Arras and did not pause until he set foot in Brussels.

Without appropriate passport, he procured some through a forger named Labbe, and Vidocq for now took on the fictional guise of Monsieur Rousseau. He knew that the family Chevalier hunted his person and that, if he hoped to survive, a pseudonym was necessary. Under that name, he took up with a beautiful but much older Belgian baroness. When not in her arms, he roamed with the Roving Army, a self-styled group of soldiers of fortune living off the fat of the land, loving women and dueling for frolic. When the baroness proposed marriage, however, he admitted he was still married and apologized for his trickery.

For his honesty, the baroness awarded him with a kiss for good luck and a farewell going-away present of fifteen hundred golden francs.



Paris streets today, unchanged
since the 1700's (Philip Enticknap)

Vidocq wandered to Paris. There, in the metropole of sin, he squandered his fortune in various cafes on *femmes* of no scruple but benefits aplenty. His money a memory, he spent the next several months loafing about the countryside with whatever pickpocket, thief or whore crossed his path. He was arrested for various malefactions nothing serious but always managed to escape from the small village gaols where detained.

During one brief stint behind bars, in the hamlet of Lille, Vidocq committed a transgression that in the long run would change his life. He sought to aid a fellow prisoner whom he thought had received too heavy of a sentence by procuring for him, through contacts, a forged parole of release. When the document was identified as a forgery, and Vidocq's part in the deceit was discovered, Vidocq found himself facing a much more serious charge than the minor infraction for which he had been jailed (brawling). With the threat of a long sentence upon him if found guilty, Vidocq, as had been his habit, escaped from his cell.

"For a short time, he made one of a gang of smugglers at Ostend, but soon he was arrested for being without papers," reports author Stead. "(Escaping again) he joined a theatrical troupe as a mime, but the clown became jealous and denounced him. This time they imprisoned him at Douai, center of the judicial system of the North...and once again he got away."

While concealed in Sainte-Omer, the fugitive learned that a certain jailkeep had been wrongly accused of having helped him make his last escape. Remindful of Victor Hugo's honorable Jean Valjean, Vidocq returned to Douai to surrender himself in order to save the guard from unjust punishment. He explained to the authorities that the jailer had nothing to do with his flight, but that he himself had thrown a guard's tunic over his shoulders and simply walked out the front door. The officials were unamused by the prank. Braced in chains, Vidocq rolled off for eight years of hard labor, first to the solemn penitentiary at Bicetre, outside Paris, thence to the galleys of the dreaded naval prison of Brest.

"Working the galleys", Stead explains, meant "performing the convict labor on the wharves, at the pumps, in the workshops. (Brest) was a modern Inferno (where) long files of men in red blouses, trousers and sabots, with shaven heads and sunken eyes, (toiled) to the eternal metallic chatter of irons, under heavy guard." Cells sweltered, homosexuality raged, and guards brutalized.

But, Vidocq managed to bribe one sentry for a suit of sailors' clothes, which he promptly donned. Eight days after he arrived at Brest, Vidocq ambled from detail, past Warden Lachique (whom he asked for a match to light his pipe) and through the gates of the prison into the avenues of town.

He was realizing, one event at a time, his own ability to disguise himself, an attribute to serve him well for decades to come. In fact, after separating himself from Douai, Vidocq roved from post town to post town, in each one adopting another disguise. In *Memoirs*, he recalls spending several days in a convent dressed as a nun. He was still a pretty-faced boy, says he, and was able to hide his broadening shoulders under the loose robes of a holy sister.

By 1798, Vidocq had grown to medium height and his once-skinny frame had squared off. A pair of blue eyes under light brows had changed from question marks to exclamation points and, according to those who had encountered him, they kept ever busy memorizing details around him that less observant folks would overlook.

Wanted by French law, he repaired to Holland. After being nearly shanghaied on a Dutch schooner, he sought the comfort of his own people after all and enlisted on the privateering vessel *Barras*, captained by the notorious Fromentin. All winter, the corsair pirated English ships in the Atlantic, hoarding booty for the wealth of France. Vidocq planned to disembark at Ostend at voyage end, from where he would make his way inland. But, at the descent of the gangplank he found authorities waiting for him with steel bracelets. This time they took him to Toulon Prison, the disciplinarian for hardened criminals.

Toulon was a hellhole. Vidocq was a master of escape and the warden knew it. Therefore, he was not permitted outside of his cell; he remained locked up, double-ironed, flogged daily and spat upon like a dog by humiliating guards. The sparse food he was given molded, but it was not as rotten as he was fast becoming. Around him lay other hardship cases that lay in the dark succumbing to dampness, disease, despair. Hope for them had vanished, trickled away, melted in foul heat.

"Never had Vidocq felt so miserable as at Toulon, where he found himself, at twenty-four years of age, in constant contact with the most hardened criminals," states E.A. Brayley Hodgetts in *Vidocq: A Master of Crime*. "He would have infinitely preferred to be reduced to live with plague-stricken people. He dreaded the contagion of this association with men whose minds were so hopelessly perverted, and all his thoughts were bent on means of escape. Various plans passed through his mind, but no favorable opportunity for carrying them out presented itself. Patience was the only remedy."

Vidocq remained resilient. And he ingratiated himself with a fellow named Jossas, a grand thief from Paris who, because he was a very rich man, bartered with the guards for better food and overall better treatment than that afforded other prisoners. Jossas, in fact, pretty much ruled his cellblock and the posterns that watched over it. What he wanted, he got: such as a manacle key so that his friend Vidocq (who he said shouldn't be in prison to begin with) could simply walk away some dark night. When the gift was presented, its recipient undid his braces, slipped out his cell window, fell in with a large company of passing sailors just off one of Napoleon's frigates and followed the motley mob to freedom. Under the green Toulon moon, Vidocq hiked out of the city.

During the first year of the new century, Vidocq spent his time living in his home town of Arras, staying with his mother and venturing outdoors only in disguise. About 1801, he took up with, of all people, the daughter of a town [gendarme] who lived alone in her own home and ran a textile shop staffed by indentured Austrian prisoners of war. Vidocq posed as one of the Austrians and worked as her butler by day her lover at night.

Again the police drew upon him. He fled, along with his lady, to Rouen where together they set up new quarters. The elder Monsieur Vidocq had passed away and the son invited his mother to live with him and his friend. Two years passed happily uneventful until the local constables once again grew interested in the Austrian's background. Alone this time, he scooted for Boulogne and, in a twinkling, found himself back on the deck of a privateering ship sailing the seas for Napoleon. More than once he proved shrink-proof in the face of enemy English cannonading; one night he bravely extinguished a random fire in the powder magazine moments before it would have blown him and the entire crew to Hades. Acts like these impressed his captain, Paulet. Vidocq may have spent his career in the service had it not been for one of the men, a former inmate at Brest, who recognized him and informed the naval police when they docked back at Boulogne.

The case of the versatile and ever-elusive Eugene Francois Vidocq caught the ears of one Monsieur Ranson, Procurator-General. After reading the file on the recently reinstated prisoner (Vidocq was currently serving the remainder of his eight-year sentence at Douai), it became apparent to the magistrate that that fellow locked in prison had tried time and again to live a respectful life between his sporadic incarcerations. Ranson urged Vidocq to appeal to the Minister of Law for re-trial.

The prisoner was delighted, but months passed without a word from the Depot de Justice. The only news he received from the outside world came from the long-forgotten Louise Chevalier, who was divorcing him through proxy. Five months passed and Vidocq decided that his patience had drawn thin this had been his longest stretch behind bars and one twilight he leaped out the mess hall window to the river below.

The same as before: Vidocq lived an impeccable and honest life (this time as a merchant), in a tiny village (this time Faubourg Sainte-Denis) with his mother and a mistress (this time a dark beauty named Annette). Underneath their feet, the dust hadn't settled long before they were on the lam again, dodging prying policemen and turncoats seeking reward. By 1809, Vidocq had had enough of running. He had been sentenced to eight years of hard labor a very short part of it having actually been served more than a decade earlier. He was about to turn age 34 and had accomplished nothing lasting in all those years. It was his turn to live.

On a cool Paris May evening of 1809, the Head of the Criminal Department at the Prefecture agreed to see a man who, his clerk said, had been waiting patiently for some time in the antechamber. Monsieur Henry's eyebrows pushed his forehead upward when, without ado, the nice-looking, squarish man sauntered into his office proclaiming, "Monsieur Inspector, I want to be an honest man; perhaps you can help me. I am Vidocq."

Vidocq knew the criminals, he knew their whereabouts, and he knew where the most wanted thieves, smugglers and killers lurked and where they could be picked up. In his travels from the law, crouching among the scoundrels out of sunlight in their hideaways, listening to them talk their talk beside them in a prison cell, he could tell more about them than any investigator in Paris, nay, in France nay, in the world. He could deliver to the Prefecture names and addresses and anything else the authorities wanted to know. He could conger up confessions and a dozen witnesses to hang these villains twice over. Best of all, he could continue catching criminals better than any officer at the Prefecture *oui*, including Monsieur Henry, Head of the Criminal Department! He could do all this and much more. If only Monsieur Henry would let him.

Vidocq wanted a job. He wanted amnesty from his sentence to prove he was an honest man.

Henry was very interested. The man's audacity was refreshing. And his idea quite practical. But Henry could not say yes to Vidocq overnight. After all, he reminded the speaker that he was *still* a convicted criminal himself. "Finish your sentence and I promise to discuss your offer with you when you are paroled man having paid his debt to society."

"But, I can do society better now," Vidocq urged.

But, Henry was a stickler for the law. He beseeched Vidocq to do the honorable thing and return to prison.

"I will surrender myself here and now in your office on one condition."

"And that is...?" asked the inspector.

"If I escape from your *gendarmes* on the way to prison and come back here to your office instead of going on the lam, will that not prove I am in earnest? Will that action not escalate the value and the urgency of my offer?"

"I believe it would," Henry answered. "It would definitely prove to me you are an honest individual. But " he shrugged, somberly, "there is no way my men will let you out of their sight. You will have to be a magician to escape them."

Vidocq nodded and went away with his captors quietly.

A few hours later he walked into Monsieur Henry's office. "Your men they seemed to have misplaced me."

Police Spy

"Where observation is concerned, chance favors only the prepared mind."

Louis Pasteur

Vidocq returned to prison, but this time as an informant. As far as his cellmates were concerned, he was just one of many like them whose luck had run out but in the eyes of French law, he was an employee of the Prefecture de Police in Paris. His pay at first was not monetary, but a verbal contract for full exoneration should he perform his duties well. The bargain was initially a probation, or, better, a compromise. If the magistrate didn't think Vidocq was fulfilling his part of the bargain, the contract would be voided and Vidocq would regress to being just another number, literally.

Monsieur Henry installed him at La Force Prison in the Marais district of Paris in mid-1809 and vanguarded the rumor among the institution that the tricky Vidocq had finally been apprehended on a capital charge. By then, the master's reputation as an escape artist had preceded him and the convicts welcomed with open arms this colorful character that had made a sham of so many French gaols.

"Vidocq gave his employers no cause for dissatisfaction," asserts biographer Philip John Stead. "His genius for playing a part...made him an ideal secret agent. Whole gangs of escaped convicts were recaptured through the information he sent to Henry. Annette (his *amour*) came to visit him in prison and carried messages for him, even undertaking investigations outside the walls. When Henry wanted to see him...an order went from the Head of the Division to Monsieur Parisot, departmental head of the prison service, instructing Vidocq to be brought from La Force as if to go before the Examining Magistrate, thus avoiding suspicion on the part of the prisoners. It was dangerous work. A careless word from a police agent, an injudicious question on the part of Vidocq himself, and next morning the wardens would find another victim of criminal justice lying in the courtyard or battered to death in his cell."

After twenty months of the same, Monsieur Henry and his superior, the Prefect Baron de Pasquier, collaborated to have Vidocq "escape" La Force so that he could serve them better beyond prison walls. Paris was engaged in crime and the force needed a man of Vidocq's knowledge and cunning to roam the streets, blending in with the denizens of the lower quarters, learning their ways, their safe houses and their plans. In March, 1811, inmates at La Force were overjoyed to hear that Vidocq once again shamed the administration by disappearing from their midst into thin air.

As he had done so often in the past, Vidocq took up private residence with his mother and current mistress (the raven-haired Annette), and he changed his name for the interim, to Monsieur Jean Luise. Of course, the criminal element knew by sight he was Vidocq; that was as it should be and was *meant* to be; for the face that had defied and buffooned the authorities for years was his ticket to their company. The police played along. From time to time, for show, they harassed the louts on the fringe of their society for the whereabouts of Vidocq; of course, these gadabouts never suspected a thing.

Paris was a city in conflict. It stretched on miles forever away from both banks of the River Seine, too large for a police force that was not only too small to cover it, but too conservative to comprehend its diversity. Its personality was defiant of description and limitless of labeling, and it wore as many faces as the multitude of expressions on the faces of the gargoyles limp roundabout the eaves of Notre Dame Cathedral.

Paris lay vivid in its own confusion, vibrant in its tumultuousness, and delightful in its immorality. It was jabberwocky, it was contradiction. Velvet-coated primps matched well with the soot-cheeked trollops and well-raised porcelain angels with the grizzled jack knives in berets too tight and trousers even tighter. Sun white parasols twirled gaily in the gloom of streets too narrow and the dimmer the oil light in the *salon* the more colorful it became. Saints and sinners professed their creeds and compromise seemed inevitable.

On canvas, Paris was a jumble-splash of things, really. Ancient belfries and winding walks, and half-tired steeple clocks and tiled roofs that sank so low they seemed to languish to the pavements; and shaky muffin carts on worn wheels, and crooked fences with crooked gates, and ornate wrought iron lamp-posts and shingles so weathered the mercantiler's name had long worn away; and marshy lowland that melted into canals and high stone steps that led to Montmartre heights; and carved storefronts with glistening glass and beveled door-frames round lop-sided doorways; and over-painted delivery wagons and spitting fountains chiseled into cherubim; and brass and silver and woollens and satins and gingham; and hemp and ribbons; and capes and top hats and heels raised and neck lines lowered and women who smoked cigarillos and men who wore roses in their lapels.

By sound, the river barges honked and the street-callers sang and the children giggled and cabriolets clattered. If every face in Paris several times a day twisted unglamorously it was because the lips formed eccentric shapes to mouth the rolling accents and tongue clicks of the language as only they, by birth, could do so well.

Paris was Beauty, and Paris was Beast. And it frolicked, no matter how it looked, sometimes a little too roughly; sometimes the games were dangerous, especially if the checkmate was a sack of gold. But, it was a city designed for tough playtimes, with too many doorways to watch, too many alleys to patrol and too many hours of darkness, even in daylight, to observe.

At night, Vidocq would slip from his home, Number 14 Rue Nueve-Sainte-Francois in Marais, and visit the gaming dens, brothels and saloons in such places as the La Courtille on the east *barriere* of the city. At either Desnoyer's, La Guillotin, Boucher's or Mere Bariolet's, his cap arched low over one eye, he shared the cheap gin and the cheap women; here he brawled and cursed with the best of them.

In his *Memoirs*, Vidocq recites: "In so populous a capital as that of Paris, there are usually a vast many places of bad resort, at which assembled persons of broken fortune and ruined fame; in order to judge of them under my own eye, I frequented every house and street of ill fame...till the rogues and thieves whom I daily met there firmly believed me to be one of themselves...Not only had I acquired their fullest confidence, but their strongest regard."

Quite often, Vidocq would leave the place laughing with tales of his escapes from prisons Douai or Toulon. For effect, he would growl out the name of some member in authority who he swore to kill one day a warden, a policeman or a judge who had made the life of Eugene Francois Vidocq so miserable.

But, most of all, he listened. One ear always remained cupped on schemes being perpetrated at the table behind him or to rumors whispered stool to stool at, say, Desnoyer's worm-eaten bar. Of course, he could never allow himself to be seen in a compromising posture of eavesdropping, so if a group of men seemed to be huddled in a mischievous tableaux in a suspicious corner of the room, Vidocq improvised. Feigning intoxication, he would waver towards them as if on his way to the bar then drop in a swoon at a nearby table, seemingly out cold. Or he would lift his mug in merry song and canter from crowd to crowd until he reached the busy bees in the corner where between his own naughty verses captured fragments of their buzzing until he deciphered the whole hum of the hive.

Much of the information he garnered was not the result of eavesdropping, however. Most of it, for that matter, came naturally and with the scene. Ingratiating himself with the underworld of Paris as he had done opened doors to learning about thieves' latest plunders, escapees' latest whereabouts, and murderers' latest victims. The swindlers and killers and con men and fences talked freely amidst their own fraternity without culpability; Vidocq was one of them he had proven that and under the swirl of ugly cheroot smoke tongues wagged, wagged, wagged while Vidocq's brain recorded it all indelibly.

Vidocq did not see himself as a traitor to his own, for he never saw himself as an outlaw only a man driven to the outer limits of outlawry by a universe of sins that labeled a hot-headed, wild young boy named Eugene an outlaw. He could have been bitter and betrayed his own sense of honor to shun a world that had wronged him. But, rather, he had decided to help that world clean up its mess and better define the line between sheer criminality and human mistakes. Betraying humanity, he would say, was one thing; eradicating those who preyed on humanity was another. Of his own admission, he never turned in a man or woman who he felt had been driven to stealing a loaf of bread because he was hungry or picking a pocket of a half-dozen francs because his children needed medicine.

Vidocq's principal functions were, according to his *Memoirs*, "To prevent crimes, discover malefactors, and to give them up to justice."

The hunter went after the big game: Watrin, a forger of bank notes who had eluded the *gendarmes* for years; Saint-Germain and Boudin, a pair of knife-wielding thieves; and even a police informer named Hotot who, while being paid for his espionage by the police, actually ran stolen merchandise.



Disguised Vidocq (Engraving
by Cruikshank)

After a year of playing himself on the lam, Vidocq began masquerading as other people, caricatures achieved by an innate acting ability and some creative and well-donned disguises. Certain criminal types in the city, noticing the sudden rise of arrests of their own over the last year, were beginning to get suspicious; feelers had gone out to catch a spy. Vidocq, cognizant of this fact, slowly evaporated his familiar self from the nighttime scenario to replace himself by a cast of characters of his own imagination. Each was crustier than the other and in search of underworld belonging. He played pirates with black-patched eyes, runaway convicts under a month's chin growth, aged thieves behind gray side whiskers, pickpockets with a limp and a cane and a ragged frock, even persons displaced from their homeland a scar-faced German swordsman wanted by the Berlin police for killing two men in a duel, the dark, Sicilian Gypsy who had killed a wife in Castelvetro, the British barrister, complete with spectacles, wanted for cutting the throat of a rival attorney in London. With dialects and colloquialism to accompany each caricature, Vidocq carried every animation with aplomb.

"(Vidocq) loved acting, and he was a great actor, without footlights," Stead tells us. "It was more necessary for the detective of his day than ours to master disguise; the distance between the classes was more marked. Clothing and manner immediately distinguished people's walk of life. With Vidocq, it was more than acting and costume, too; he could even contort his body and make himself another man."

In time, Vidocq as the rag-tags knew him, faded entirely from the Parisian coves of infamy.

He had not realized the value in his changing of courses until one amusing and very enlightening incident occurred in early 1812. The Prefect had put him on a special mission to track down a gang of robbers that had been hitting homes across the Faubourg-Sainte-Germain district. Vidocq, while enacting one of his various *roles*, learned that its leader was a man named Guevive, a former fencing master gone bad. This Guevive could usually be found haunting the low-beamed establishment Boucher's with his lieutenant, a sneak thief named Joubert. Engaging the seedy duo in dialogue one spring night, Vidocq convinced the pair that he was a smuggler named Jules in bad straits, but reliable, who would like to join them in their next *operation*.

His timing was inveterate, for Guevive confessed that his filchers were assembling that very evening on Rue Cassette to rob one of the mansions along the boulevard *but*. Guevive told him, "You're a well-muscled brute, and I'd prefer you to help me perform [another] job instead tonight."

"Anything, m'nsieur!" Vidocq exclaimed.

Guevive nodded. "Have you ever heard of a scoundrel called Vidocq?"

It took total verve for the other not to show surprise. "*Vidocq? Vidocq?* No, I don't think so," answered the smuggler Jules. "It is not familiar to me, that name."

"Well, nevermind who he is, you and I are going to kill him tonight."

"Kill him?" Vidocq chuckled. "Shouldn't I know who he is that I should have to kill him?"

"Well," Guevive sighed after a pause, "many of us think he is an informant to the *gendarmes*."

"*Sacre bleu!*" Vidocq crossed himself dramatically. "Lowest of the low!"

"Then you will help me?"

"*Oui*, m'nsieur, count me in!" Vidocq slapped the tabletop. Their mugs rattled. "Where do we find this...er, *serpentin*?"

"Number 14 Rue Nueve-Sainte-Francois," Guevive responded. "Meet me outside his home at midnight. We will wait for him to come in or go out. After the scum is thrashed, you and I will meet Joubert and my men at my warehouse on Rue Sainte-Jacques where we, yourself included, will split the gains from the evening's heist."

Vidocq winked. Grinning. And he wondered how the hell they had gotten his address.

After notifying the constabulary of the planned robbery at Rue Cassette, Vidocq rushed back to his own street where he found Guevive sulking in its shadows; there he spent until dawn waiting for himself to appear on the walk. After a while, the gang leader tired of the hunt and postponed the murder for another night.

"Vidocq decided that it should be postponed longer than Guevive expected," author Stead muses. The two men returned to the Rue Sainte-Jacques to convene with the housebreakers. Continues Stead: "Before they even had time to set out the plunder on the table, the police were in the room. Vidocq had got under the bed at the first alarm and, when the room had been 'searched' and the police had departed with their prisoners and the booty, he scrambled out to find himself alone with Joubert's mistress. She was delighted. Now she could spend the night with him!"

She must not have been a great beauty, hints the author, for Vidocq excused himself and went home.

Office of the Surete

"Do your duty, and leave the rest to the gods."

Pierre Corneille

At the time of Vidocq's ingress to government service, 1809, the police force, or Prefecture, in Paris was comprised of two divisions: the First Division, or the Administrative Branch, and the Second Division, or Special Investigative Branch. The latter, managed by Monsieur Henry, was the unit to which Vidocq belonged; it concerned itself with the overall battling of crime. Overseeing both sectors was a Prefect (Chief of Police), Baron de Pasquier, housed on the Rue de Jerusalem. It was a very military system in a decade of austere empirical rule that began with the ascendancy of Napoleon in December, 1804.

To monitor criminal activity, the city was divided into geographic sectors, each under the jurisdiction of a *commissaire* (commissioner). Allotted throughout were *officers de paix* (police captains); there was generally at least one such officer on duty in each district 24 hours a day.

As tidy and compact as it sounds, there were difficulties. One was borne from overpopulation. Paris had become the hub of Europe and its allure as a city on the move had drawn thousands from across the continent; strangers roamed the streets; many of them had come for employment, others just to play; unfortunately, often this meant *foul* play.

Simultaneously, Napoleon's military campaigns had drained France of many of its able-bodied young men who ordinarily would have made excellent *gendarmes*; Paris, as well as other cities in the country, found their law-keeping forces markedly understaffed while crime rose.

Then there were the turf wars in Paris. The parochial delineation in the city forbade *gendarmes* to pursue criminals across district borders without consent of the commissaire, who rarely gave it, regarding his territory as singular. More often than not, the latter concerned himself with crimes committed within his own allotted area and had no time to worry about miscreants passing through as long as they did not offend any laws within his district. Wrongdoer remained untouched. That said, a thief knew that in order to escape punishment all he had to do was rob a market in Chaillot and step into a safehouse in Montmartre. Escape was as easy, then, as crossing one of many bridges over the River Seine.

Vidocq, witnessing the results of these calamities, stepped forward with what Monsieur Henry and Baron de Pasquier considered a magnificent solution: creation of a new, small, plainclothes undercover unit to keep strict surveillance over all ex-convicts and known criminals living in and migrating into the city; to pursue all lawbreakers and make arrests; and to prevent criminal activity before it occurred. This *Brigade de Surete* (Brigade of Security) would not be confined district to district, he recommended, but have free rein across the entire Cite Paris. Criminals, unable to hopscotch, would be forced out in the open more prevalently.

The two men in charge, the baron and Monsieur Henry, applauded Vidocq's ingenuity and observed it as a plan long overdue and one worthy of the man who had proved to be their most clever and industrious spy. Baron de Pasquier allocated funds for the new service, which would be under the auspices of Monsieur Henry, and allowed Vidocq four men to begin with (the number eventually rose to twelve) and a suite of offices at Number 6, Quai de Orfevre, near the Prefect.

The Surete was born. This dream of Vidocq's would, over the years, grow to become the Surete Nationale. But, even in Vidocq's days, it reached a status as professional as Scotland Yard in London or as the FBI a century later in America.

Vidocq required agents who knew Paris and, more than that, who knew what doors to peek into, what alleys to look down, and had cat's eyes to see in the dark. It is fact, then, that his first agents were all former criminals, the only men he considered tough enough and verbally street-wise to handle the dangerous job he had in store for them. Laying the foundation for something he hoped would blossom required action and results.

Translated: penetrating the abyss.

The only way to accomplish that, Vidocq ascertained, was to first captivate the trust of the underworld. And only those who had been there once could pull it off. No one was that great of an actor. His men would be called upon to move in among the rogues, become one of them in concept, and maintain the masquerade so that the murderous lowlife would never catch on. For, if they smelled an informer, they would happily roast him over hot coals when the time came.

With the aid of these men "Vidocq caught a tremendous amount of criminals in a critical period in the history of Paris," relates the book, *Vidocq, Picaroon of Crime*. "And it was in his nature to employ them, for he genuinely believed (and the belief was still revolutionary in his time) that the ex-convict, if he were helped, could be a useful member of society...The memory of his own struggle predisposed him in favor of the unlucky."

Years later, Vidocq wrote of some of his police peers' skepticism over his hiring of ex-criminals, and defended his choice: "I preferred men whose record had given them a little celebrity. Well! I often gave these men the most delicate missions. They had considerable sums to deliver to the police or the prison offices; they took part in operations in which they could have easily laid hands on large amounts (of money), and not one of them, not a single one, betrayed my trust."

Yet, there was dissention from the units in the Prefecture. District commissioners and the *officers de paix* did not approve of undercover agents working their areas yes, and ex-convicts at that! The official departments began referring to the Suret as "Vidocq's Gang," and scoffed at the idea that a runaway convict who had never been formally pardoned, was treated with the same respect if not more by the Prefect.

Quite frankly, much of the resentment was based on jealousy, for Vidocq and his men were able to accomplish in a short time what the city police had been unable to do for years. The number of arrests and convictions, due in large part to Vidocq's intervention, skyrocketed since he was given tenure.

Take for instance the raid on the saloon, Desnoyer's. It had long been known as one of the principle watering holes for the crooks, bashers, thieves, muggers, rollers and illegitimates of Paris. At any given time, the number of wastrels gathered there resembled an army, an ugly, mean army. When one of the elder *officers de paix*, Monsieur Yvnier, was told that he should lend some gendarmes to Vidocq who was just about to raid the tavern, Yvnier replied, "To raid the place would require a battalion! Vidocq will fail!"

But, Vidocq took with him only two of his own men, four of Yvnier's policemen, a piece of chalk, a sack of handcuffs and a warrant. And he stepped into Desnoyer's to survey the usual night revelry he had seen it often, and the place hadn't changed an iota drunken whores in low-cut blouses hanging on drunken thugs in caps with brims yanked low, dice players swearing their bad luck or blaming a fellow player for cheating, confidence men hovered over their tables trading anecdotes, ruffians of a varied sort arm wrestling, dart throwing, spitting, growling, drooling, drinking. In the corner a squeezebox heaved a song and a canary warbled a ditty to which no one listened. The place smelled of stale beer, rancid whiskey, opium, must, dust and urine.

Those who spotted Vidocq cross the threshold were about to shout a greeting of "Where the hell ya' been?" when they stopped short at the site of those other men behind him, some with leather *gendarme* capes tossed back over their shoulders.

"Vidocq ordered the musicians to stop playing and the couples to clear off the dance floor," Philip John Stead pens in *Vidocq, Picaroon of Crime*. "There was some grim murmuring as the crowd surged away from him. When there was an uneasy movement towards the door, he knew there would be no trouble. He thrust through the crowd and placed himself there. Then he ordered the men to pass out into the street in single file. As they went by he scrutinized their faces. When he saw a man he wanted, he made a cross on his back with the chalk (indicating to the *gendarmes* whom to detain)...Vidocq took thirty-eight men to the depot-prison that night."

It was a rousing victory for Vidocq who clearly showed how much he could accomplish with so very few men and the right men. But, blustering in the face of the established police force would create a rivalry that would develop into a bitter feud whose repercussions to come would be near-fatal for the creator of the Surete.

For now, however, there was honor, and drama. After that evening, Vidocq knew that word of his being would blast like an icy wind throughout the underworld. In fact, in case anyone did not know who he was or had doubts about who had ordered such a nervy raid, he ended the incursion by telling those he left behind at Desnoyer's, "I am Vidocq! Remember me!"

He ordered the word spread. And that is why he self-elected to visit the prison at Bicetre. The time he had served there under different circumstances had given him a valuable lesson: that Bicetre was one of the prisons that bred, more than reformed, the animal in human nature, and its convicts came out tiger-sharp and salivating hungry. Most of them headed straight to Paris upon their parole to lever their prospects, this time more experienced.

He had the warden assemble the worst of them, hundreds strong, in the courtyard so he could study their visages, one at a time, and remember them when they dared come to Paris. Because the word had gone out ahead of time that they were to be examined by Vidocq the police spy, there was general wailing and gnashing so that by the time Vidocq appeared the corps of prisoners were Hottentots. Nonetheless, Vidocq strolled amid them, refusing to recoil from their glares and grimaces. He recognized many of them whose paths he had previously crossed. No one said a thing; only the wind whispered through the yard; but he knew and they knew that he had recorded each of their faces, every line, every mole and knife scar, and would be on them forthwith should they meet again in Paris.

The history of 17th- and 18th-Century France is slammed with political change. The country leaped from one form of government to another in an effort to find itself a way of life that suited its nature, a blend of fire and romance. Vidocq's earliest years survived the Reign of Terror, which saw an end to a monarchy and the beginning of a peoples' republic. While Vidocq was still on the run from the law, a young lieutenant named Napoleon Bonaparte had wiggled his way into the ruling body created by the revolution and, backed by bayonets, crowned himself emperor in 1804 in a spectacular coronation at Notre Dame Cathedral. Napoleon had big dreams, to give the world to France on a platter. As part of his ambition, he simultaneously named Paris *la capitale* of his dynasty. The period of his reign (1804-1815) is considered France's most glorious moment.

Reads Michelin Company's excellent guidebook to Paris: "The Louvre Palace was altered; the Arc de Triomphe de Corrousel erected; new bridges (Austerlitz, Ilna, and the smaller Pasterelle des Arts) were built across the Seine...and the Ourcq and Sainte-Martin canals were dug. The spoils of war increased the artistic treasures of the Louvre. Roads were built, and everywhere monuments were raised to himself and his armies..."



The Arc de Triomphe today (Richard Glover)

But, in 1814, Paris' gaiety was shaken when Napoleon's once-unbeatable forces floundered at Waterloo. Long-time foes Britain and Austria pounded French borders and by the following April the city of Paris was overtaken. Louis XVIII was crowned king and Napoleon was exiled to the Isle of Elba. Thus began the period later termed the Restoration (due more to the transitory nature of the government than the municipal changes the king made within the city), and in effecting a "restoration," Paris once again found itself in the type of upheaval that is genetic with the collapse of an Empire. Paris' streets screamed with disorder and shouts of enfranchisement.

The official police had their hands full trying to calm the general chaos. Vidocq's Surete worked around the clock to not only squelch the thieves and killers who took advantage of the dark situation, but also to stamp out any insidious movements by rebels who sought to add panic on top of panic by creating a provisional form of government while King Louis' monarchical slippers were still wet.

Throughout, it had been and would continue to be part of Vidocq's nature to roll with the reshaping of conservative government. While he devoted his time to battling civil outlawry, he, being a man who loved his country, always found time to assist the government whatever form it took to crush the peoples who considered radical turnabouts that might destroy France forever. These he rubbed out with a heavy heel.

It was Vidocq's earnest belief that man was basically a creature of God, and was Good; he did not disfavor any caste over another, nor did he openly prefer one religion or race. There were lawbreakers and those who abided the law. But, he hated the *hypocrisie* that came as a result of the Restoration when, in the wake of a more social awareness it became fashionable once again to be aristocratic, so many of the lower echelon artificially claim themselves members of a gentryship. It had been twenty years since the Reign of Terror had sent the families of nobility racing for their lives out of France; now with the monarchy restored, many sons and daughters of patricians returned to reclaim their rightful etch in the Parisian community. With the blue-blood lineage separated from the city for two decades, it was easy for an astute swindler and forger to claim himself an heir to such and such an estate or, if naught else, to the polite favors due the suffering rich.

One afternoon, Vidocq noticed an older man in noble attire and medallions emerge from a doorway of the Pavillion de Flore. Something did not match up, for this gentleman of ruffles and silks and gold-knobbed cane was also wearing the face of a ruffian he had known from prison named Chambreiul; Chambreiul was supposed to be serving a long sentence for stealing bank-notes

The Surete investigated. It learned that this fellow had recently come to Paris bearing papers that linked him to *noblesse oblige*. Charming society (including the Minister of France), he won the envious appointment of Chief of Palace Police!

Vidocq and another agent appeared at the palace and, to the horror of the home office and the embarrassment of the Paris police arrested Chambreiul on the spot.

"Audacity!" challenged the man in cuffs to his detainer. "I will have your head for this error!"

Monsieur Henry ordered a search of Chambreiul's residence and uncovered documents directly linking him to the forger who had escaped prison. The Marquis de Chambreiul was no more. Paris laughed. The Minister groped for an explanation. The police fumed; Vidocq, that ex-convict who they said would take Paris for everything he could get his hands on, was instead giving Paris something it needed but never quite manifest: a belief in law enforcement.

The *people* loved Vidocq; he was a hero to little boys and a heartthrob to their mothers; women adored him and when he passed in his carriage down the scented byways of Paris, wrapped in his blue cloak and high collar, they edged to the curbs to catch a glimpse of his rugged, handsome face. Citizens called him the Sultan, for he had at his finger-click the attention of a city that treated him with *le majeste* and doted on him, their warrior triumphant.

"Vidocq was a household word in Paris," exclaims Philip John Stead. "It was the little people of the capital who spoke of him most the concierges in their leather aprons, the small shopkeepers of the quarter, the regulars in the *bistro*, the porters, the cabmen, the laborers. For them he became the police hero, the first police hero the world had ever had. The thieves cowered in their dens as the powerful silhouette, caped coat and square hat, elegant boots and riding crop, was flung on the blind."

As head of the already-fabled Surete, and still in his forties, Vidocq had instituted remarkable and novel crime-fighting procedures, including the study of murder weapons, the use of plaster of paris casts to trace boot sizes, and a card-indexing system identifying every known wastrel in Paris by his or her crimes and vital statistics. By 1817, his security organization had grown to a dozen men, each chosen personally by their chief. In that year alone, Vidocq's Surete garnered 811 arrests among them, 349 thieves, 46 forgers, 43 parole breakers, 38 fences of stolen property, 15 assassins and 14 escaped prisoners. Two hundred and twenty nine of those apprehended were banished from Paris.

Domestic Life and Politics

"The great and glorious masterpiece of man is to know how to live to purpose."

Michel de Montaigne

In the 1820s, Vidocq's life faced many challenges, both in private and professional experiences. They constituted the ups and downs of a successful and brilliant man balancing several juggling balls at one time no matter how successful, no matter how brilliant, sometimes difficult.

His beloved mother, whom he had personally cared for since his father died twenty years earlier, now passed away in 1820. Paris turned out in respect for the requiem at Notre Dame. Her passing was treated as though she was royalty, she being the matron of the king of detectives.

That same year, Vidocq married Jeanne-Victoire Gueren. Little is known about her except that she was frail and often sickly. The marriage by all accounts seems to have been a happy one; they lived on the Rue de l'Hirondelle without domestic problems; but her constant illnesses overcame her and she died young, four years after the nuptial. Again, Paris grieved.

The demanding operation of the Surete kept Vidocq from remorse and his spirits high. Earning five thousand francs a year in government service, he took on many private cases after hours. His reputation allowed him to seek top fee and, as he never left a client wanting, word of mouth served to be his best promotional. Prospective customers waited in line to see him, to find a missing daughter, recover a stolen artifact or, as many of his clients were businessmen, to discourage embezzlement or find an employee who absconded with cash or property.

Vidocq was soon able to build a small home in the country, in pastel-green Sainte-Mande. The seclusion provided an airy respite away from the gagging dens and alleys where his undercover work led him. He even managed to mix a little pleasure with business by buying interest in a tavern on the Rue de l'Orme where, strangely, thieves met in abundance not knowing the real identity of the proprietor. Secrets of the underworld swept from table to table while his agents and sometimes Vidocq himself in wig and false beard sat amongst them.

Some time in the late 1820s, records are unclear, Vidocq remarried. His third wife was a woman eighteen years younger and purported to be his cousin, Fleuride Maniez. Scholars say she was the perfect woman for her husband, able to bear his ungodly long work hours, his sometimes erratic behavior and his penchant for other women.

Vidocq adored Fleuride, there is no doubt of that, and she knew it; he doted on her. Perhaps that is why she refused to let his various infidelities ruin an otherwise domestic tranquility. Women had always found the swashbuckling Vidocq attractive; by no means did he snub their advances. Through his penniless years on the road he had had dozens of *busques* who pampered him, protected him, funded him; fondled him, some one-night stands, others mistress like the one-time dark-tressed beauty Annette (who history has lost track of). They first adored his boyish charm, then his matured elegance that never vanished even in bad times to come.

Another reason his wife may have tolerated his straying was that she knew as many knew there was but one woman who Monsieur Vidocq truly worshipped, and no one, nothing, would ever compete with. He idolized Lady Paris.

And when the Lady was in distress, Vidocq, the gallant knight, galloped forth to aid her.

The political structure of the city aye, the country continued to change. The kings were back in power, but the people remembered the glory days of the empire under Napoleon. Louis XVIII had been somewhat cognizant of the feeling and remained timid of imposition; he had put most of his effort in restructuring only the physical Paris (his reign, says Michelin's *Paris in Your Pocket*, saw the "addition of 21,000 apartment houses and many new streets"), but his successor, Charles X, though a kind man, emphasized the power of the monarchy. One of the strategies he deployed to maintain monarchical law and order was taking the Paris police force under his wing so that it would fly in his direction. He appointed an extreme loyalist, Guy Delaveau, as Prefect who, in turn, ousted Monsieur Henry from the chair of the Second Division and replaced him with one of his own, a fussy ill-humored Monsieur Duplessis. Both new officials were new hard-liners whose arching objective was to rid the city of political opposition to the throne.

With Henry's discharge, Vidocq found himself absent a valuable ally. So did the citizens of Paris. Under Prefect Delaveau, the police now antagonized the *citoyens* by labeling all Republicanism and Bonapartism, brothers to a cause, as criminal. They arrested men like the poet Beranger whose verses mocked the do-nothing crowns and dreamed vastly of zenith days.

Vidocq, whose heart lay with the Bonapartists, nevertheless strove, as he had always strove, to keep law and order in Paris, whatever direction the city took politically. But, because he was a man who rose so swiftly under the Bonapartist regime, along with his Bonapartist friends, he discovered that he was now being watched and viewed by the replacing authorities with as much mistrust as the corner-soap-box insurgents. They tried to jeopardize his career, clearly fishing for an opportunity to undermine the value of his position, and defame his character.

Monsieur Duplessis wrote him a viciously abrading letter over a trifle, which Vidocq shrugged off as intemperance of inexperience, but when another came attacking the conduct of the Surete over another trivial matter, Vidocq snapped back, "For eighteen years I have served the police with distinction," he wrote. "I have never received a single approach from your predecessors: I must therefore think that I never deserved one. Since your nomination to the Second Division, this is the second time you have done me the honor to address one to me on complaining of the agents...To save you, Monsieur, the inconvenience of redressing me (again), I have the honor to ask you to be good enough to accept my resignation."

The *officers de paix* and *commisaires* who had long wanted to see Vidocq out celebrated. But, their joy was short-lived. Duplessis fumbled his assignment miserably and, simultaneously, Prefect Delaveau splashed egg on his own face with a series of nasty blunders. Several Prefects came and went over the next many months, unable to control rising crime and political dissention, until a gentleman of fine administrative bearing, Henri-Josephe Gisquet, stepped into the difficult shoes. His first call was to reassign Vidocq to his former position as head of the Surete.

The political air was humid, at best. Charles X had been overthrown in 1830 in a tri-day revolution known as Three Glorious Days, but the result of the rebels' arm rising turned out ingloriously. Louise-Phillipe, Duke d'Orleans, mounted the throne and, says the book, *Vidocq, Picaroon of Crime*, "The Republicans, who had done most of the fighting on the barricades, were far from delighted at finding they had shed their blood to create another monarchy."

Gisquet and Vidocq worked hand in hand over the next year to appease the situation the best they could, but finally they lost ground to something no human man could control, Plague! Cholera swept the city in 1832, speedily killing over 17,000 people. Citizen tempers having already been strained to the limit, they detonated when rumors spread faster than the disease that the monarchial-ruled police had poisoned the water to eliminate dissenters. Rioting broke asunder throughout Paris on the evening of June 5, citizen mobs once again raising boulevard barricades and shouting, *Liberte!* A full-scale revolution lay a gunshot away. Louis-Phillipe went into hiding with a brace of pistols at his side



Hotel de Ville (The Travel Diary)

Throughout the night the report of muskets could be heard as they held back the attacking army of the king. Around the Hotel de Ville, which housed the government's administrative offices, the streets were littered with bodies of both checkered citizens and the red-and-blue uniformed soldiery. Authorities reasoned that if the cavalry could break through in large numbers they could overtake the insurgents, but several of the larger barricades, strategically placed at important intersections, held tight. Vidocq drew up a plan:

He told Gisquet that he believed a small band of men, his agents at the Surete and some volunteers, could do what a large force of armed troops could not silently clean out, one by one, the street-side fortresses to permit the cavalry ingress.

As a crimson dawn bathed the facade of Notre Dame, Vidocq's group of 30 men drew near the first target. Dressed in the scarves of ordinary merchants, they were able to steal their way into the blockades and disarm the main rioters, forcibly ejecting them over the walls of mealy bags, kegs, wagon wheels and hay bales. At some of the nests, the rebels managed to get off a volley of shots before they were incapacitated. Vidocq heard the whine of their bullets pass his eardrum, but he plowed ahead undeterred. At 56 years old, the Sultan was still a powerhouse, grappling with the most violent of the malcontents, slapping them in iron cuffs, muffling them and tossing them aside to wiggle and sputter. In certain instances, the insurrectionists recognized the famous Vidocq and, as they had joined the fighting more for sport than politics, and not wishing to face the Surete's dungeons, humbly threw down their firearms, chanting "Vidocq! Vidocq!" as if in exultation.

After thirty-six hours, the revolt was crushed. While the smell of gunpowder still burned the air over the Rue de Jerusalem outside his office window, Prefect Gisquet wrote to the Prime Minister of France: "Among the agents of my administration who displayed the greatest zeal, courage and devotion in suppressing the revolt on the two days of the 5th and 6th of June, I must distinguish the Sieur Vidocq, head of the *brigade de surete*. This report, a copy of which I have the honor to address to your Excellency, will bear witness to the presence of mind and intrepidity shown by this agent at a critical time, and the dangers he ran in defense of public order and the law..."

Once again, Vidocq had grabbed the attention that the city constabulary thought should have been given them. The "coals of fire" that Solomon alludes to jealousy were about to be dumped again on Vidocq from on high.

The incident evolved from a simple robbery of a restaurant near Fontainebleau, committed by a band of thieves that had been under suspicion by Vidocq for some time. Prior to the break-in, one of Vidocq's Surete agents, a man called Leger, had gone undercover to trail their movements. When the men were arrested, however, they told the Prefect de Police that Leger had done more than his duty as agent he had served as *double agent*, crossing up his superior Vidocq by actually using his authoritative powers to procure for them a key to the said restaurant to make their job easier

If this were true, the newspapers reminded the public, it was the first time that a member of the Surete had failed in his responsibilities. More so, if it was true, it was the first time that Vidocq's implicit belief in his own squad had erred. In September, 1832, the Court of Assizes convened to try the case and, from the outset, it smelled of intrigue. "The whole trial was cloudy the themes of provocation, of political animosity and of prisoners' conspiracies were hopelessly tangled," author Philip John Stead reports. "As it was, (a) conspiracy probably existed."

In the end, the central defendants were handed down a twenty-year sentence, but Leger, whom the jury believed had served as accessory, received two years. It seemed a compromise to please both the protagonists and antagonists of Vidocq. But, the dutiful Gisquet, who had written so much praise of Vidocq after the peoples' rebellion, felt encumbered by the pressure of his office to ask for Vidocq's resignation.

Because Leger had been, like all of the Suret agents, an ex-criminal, the issue of Vidocq's employing such men had again been raised. Vidocq may have fought to retain his job instead of surrendering it so easily had he not seen an inevitable uphill fight to retain the policy he adhered. Said he, "It was my belief that to keep the criminals down one had to use men who knew them and had lived among them...Deprived of such tools, I felt reduced to impotence." After he resigned, Gisquet reorganized the Surete, hiring investigators straight from the muster of *gendarmes*, but the renovation did not reach the success it once had garnered.



Title pages of the first English edition of
Memoirs (Courtesy Patterson Smith)

With time on his hands, Vidocq busied himself in business. He invested in a paper manufacturing plant at Sainte-Maude, again hiring former convicts. (His faith that man was only as good as the support he received from his fellow man never wavered.) Unfortunately, he was unable to receive the necessary capital to keep the mill in operation, but in its short tenure the company introduced both forge-proof paper and indelible ink, concepts that would prove popular in decades ahead but for which Vidocq nor his company were ever credited.

He also had written his *Memoirs*. The first edition published in 1828 in France became a best seller and was translated into English within a year. Vidocq was not altogether pleased with the final product, for the initial publisher had hired a ghostwriter to lengthen Vidocq's original manuscript and the result was much fiction wrapped around fact. Nevertheless, *Memoirs* made Vidocq an international celebrity and his life story an inspiration for many classical works of literature to come.

A Private Detective's Adventures

"For want of a nail the shoe is lost, for want of a shoe the horse is lost, for want of a horse the rider is lost."

George Herbert

Vidocq was restless. But, as in a man of his fiber, where drive is essential, genius is usually the result. In 1832, at 58 years old, not long after retiring from the Surete, he created one more benchmark to become a role model of his industry. He opened the world's first formal private detective agency.

Freelance private investigation a client-dedicated operation of crime solution without the bureaucratic quagmire had never been heard of until Vidocq created the occupation. As he had done with the creation of the Surete, he again brought a new challenge to criminals and a new advantage to law abiders; his was a system of law enforcement that Allan J. Pinkerton was to emulate twenty years later in Chicago.

In advertising his business, he wrote, not humbly but concisely, "For a long time, I have been maturing the project which I now put before the public, and which, it may be, I alone can successfully undertake and realize."

Vidocq's shingle and business cards read, "*Le Bureau de Renseignements*," or "Office of Intelligence". The cases Vidocq took were of a particular concentration, aimed at eradicating Paris of financial cheats and sycophants who craftily took advantage of individuals and business during what Philip John Stead calls "the money-mad, mercantile city of (King) Louis Phillipe (in) that great age of capitalism."

The writer Stead goes on: "Vidocq could isolate and attack a kind of criminal which had grown with the economic change itself. This time the hunt was up for the parasites that preyed on commerce, the swindlers and the confidence men, the apparently easy and leisured individuals who lived on perpetual and never-to-be liquidated credit. All those dandies with...smart apartments in the Chausse d'Antin, the tilbury with the English horses, clothes by Chevreuil, gloves by Walker, hats from Bandoni, boots by Concanon, cane by Thomassin, cigar case by Giroux! Some of the big men even turned banker (who) cleaned up fast by getting false drafts honored by other banks. When things got too hot, the whole establishment moved elsewhere and opened under another name."

Using the same it-takes-a-thief-to-know-one principle, as had been the foundation of his Surete, Vidocq hired as his agents many reformed swindlers. These men knew the perpetrators, the schemes, the plays, and the circuit.

In less than two years, the agency had, to its credit, rounded up a small army of charlatans who would have otherwise continued to gyp and embezzle banks, law offices, shipping firms and other establishments that had had the sense to hire Vidocq. At one period, appraisers estimated that Vidocq's Bureau de Renseignements had recovered 60,000 francs in stolen property from eleven assorted clients.



Vidocq in about 1841
(Bilbiotheque Nacionale, Paris)

As the business grew, Vidocq's staff rose to a personnel of twenty men and he began taking general theft cases now, also, which brought in a vast number of new clients. From time to time, agents took on impromptu cases, such as finding missing persons. Some of these were rather out of the ordinary. Take the young woman who had vanished from home to hide out, where Vidocq traced her down, in the Convent of Sainte-Michele. She had left her lover and children when she felt she was becoming too materialistic; confused and feeling guilty, she sought coventry from the superficiality of the world. After some coaxing, Vidocq convinced her to return to the people who cared for her and to take each day at a time.

The agency moved twice from 1834 to 1836, each time to a more fashionable area, from the original location on the Rue Cloche-Perce to the Rue Pont Louis-Philippe, overlooking the Seine, thence to the busy Rue Nueve-Sainte-Eustache. In 1838, he opened his doors onto the busiest commercial area in Paris, Galerie Vivienne.

The Galerie, relates Stead, "outdid the Palais-Royal in terms of elegance and popularity. It was the smartest center in Paris, and the world of fashion patronized its modistes and couturiers, perfumers and confectioners; their fine new glass fronts shone before exquisite and imaginative displays."

Daybreak through the door of Number 13, which cut ominously into the faade of the Galerie, the figure of Vidocq could be seen entering every day; up a tight flight of stairs, past its wrought iron fancies, and into the suite of chambers beyond where, the office never closing, a dozen agents were already making out reports, interviewing clients or suspects and waiting to see their master on a matter that could not wait. Much after dark, lantern light flickered through the portieres reminding passersby on the avenue below that Vidocq was catching crooks.

His old enemies at the Prefecture continued to be obsessed with Vidocq's fame. Even though they had pushed him from the Surete, it wasn't enough; they wanted the venerable old man gone from the scene of Paris. As long as there was Vidocq arresting and indicting, they knew the people of Paris would be comparing them to him and there was no comparison. Even the brother of the current head of the Suretee, when his bank was embezzled, had gone to Vidocq not the police for recovery of the money. Now, even on his own, Vidocq was embarrassing the authorities, being viewed as *the* man to go to when in trouble.

The recorded history of the Champaix case, as will be related here, seems to indicate that the powers-that-be finally gathered to set him up for disaster. Although Vidocq himself claimed that it was a frame-up, history claims no proof, only surmising. But, Vidocq suddenly found himself in a wedge that nearly ruined everything he had aspired for, including his good name.

It began simply enough, this matter. In late summer, 1842, a band of tradesmen hired Vidocq to hunt down and prosecute a swindler by the name of Champaix who, under false accreditation, had borrowed trade and money from their shops before disappearing into oblivion. They wanted to be repaid and were willing to give Vidocq 45 percent of the accumulated remuneration if he could nab Champaix. The case fell into Vidocq's expertise and he quickly accepted it.

Champaix was not a notorious fellow, but a roustabout who had scored a big hit on unsuspecting business types. As he was more of an artful dodger than anything, he managed to elude even the shadow-chasing Bureau de Renseignements for some time. At last, an informant named Landier approached Vidocq and agreed to lead him to Champaix for a price. A handshake followed and the next morning, August 12, Landier ushered Vidocq and a few of his agents to the Rue de Bac on the riverfront, where indeed they caught their man, unprepared, on the boardwalk.

Back at the Bureau de Renseignements' offices, a trembling Champaix admitted his crime and tearfully agreed to turn over a savings of 2,200 francs to the cheated clients; he also signed contracts of obligation promising to return the remainder of monies owed within a reasonable span of time. Vidocq, not sensing a desperate character, didn't prosecute, but released him on his own faith, even giving the hungry man money for that night's supper. Case closed. He contacted his clients and gave them the good news.



The Conciergerie (The Travel Library)

Before the week had ended, the present Chief Inspector of the Surete leading a brigade of *gendarmes*, arrested Vidocq at the Galerie Vivienne. Charging him with false arrest, unlawful detention of a prisoner and obtaining money under false pretense, they threw him into the dreaded Conciergerie, the 14th Century castle-prison that fifty years earlier had held Marie Antoinette and so-many royalty before they were guillotined during the Reign of Terror.

Throughout the winter months, 67-year-old Vidocq lay in the rat-infested dampness of the ancient fortress, unable to hear the details of the charges set against him. He was treated no better than the worst criminal there. In fact, Vidocq feared for his life since many of the worst criminals there were men he had helped commit.

He wrote his wife that he was afraid to go to the lavatory lest his throat be cut. Suffering from rheumatism, his health went untreated until his wife Fleuride, after many supplications, was permitted to visit him, briefly, and attend to him.

As Spring and his trial neared, he received the right to obtain a lawyer. Through his chosen attorney the brilliant Jules Favre Vidocq at last was able to read his indictment. Champaix, the man he had treated so humanely, claimed that he was arrested under false pretense that Vidocq had claimed to be an officer of the King and that he was coerced into handing over the 2,200 francs for fear of his life.

The charges reeked of *duplicite*.



The Palais de Justice (Richard Glover)

Court opened May 3, 1843, at the Palais de Justice to a packed courtroom; the public pressed to see their hero who they were sure had been unjustly accused. In court, under the watchful eye of President Monsieur Barbou, Champaix attested that when Vidocq approached him on the Rue de Bac he had ordered him to stop "in the name of the law!" It was only later, he claimed, when delivered by hansom cab to the Bureau de Renseignements that he realized he had been apprehended not by the official police but by a private detective. The swindler also testified that the agents roughly interrogated him through the night in a hot, stifling small room, threatening him with bodily harm, until he agreed to hand over his life savings.

In turn, Vidocq answered the allegations. In the first place, he denied having ever impersonated an officer of the law. When meeting Champaix on the street, his greeting had been, "Good morning, monsieur. Have you any money for your creditors?" He then introduced himself and, without pressure, asked if the man would accompany him to his headquarters to talk over the situation. Champaix agreed. At no time throughout the ride was the man held against his will and could have jumped from the conveyance had he the notion to do so.

As for his detention at the Bureau de Renseignements and his treatment there, Vidocq explained that their session was held in a very open room, adjacent to the foyer, and which opened onto a busy public terrace. This claim was supported by witnesses who saw Champaix chatting freely, looking relaxed and under no restraint whatsoever. A client of Vidocq's told of meeting Champaix on the street the day after and, when asking him what he was doing at the Bureau, Champaix confessed what had transpired, heartily complimenting Vidocq's all-too-fair treatment of him.

In summary, Champaix came to the Bureau de Renseignements fully aware that he was dealing with Vidocq the private detective, was never manhandled, and of his own concurrence arranged to deposit the 2,200 francs into Vidocq's account as a payment toward the debt he owed his victims.

Defense Attorney Jules Favre brought into court dozens of people who vouched for Vidocq's ethics, including proprietors of business who had hired him to collect large amounts of debt; his conduct and his honesty, they lauded, were both exemplary.

Favre also hinted at an official hoodwink, asserting that the police had confiscated Vidocq's private business ledgers unlawfully and interviewed a throng of people in order to find one disparaging remark about Eugene Francois Vidocq. "You had him arrested and made a thorough search of his files. He keeps everything, the most insignificant letters as well as those most able to compromise him. You have not stopped there; you have called before you people with whom he has done business more than five hundred of them. Well, speak. Have you found one with cause of complaint against him? Have you been able to marshal them in support of the charge? Not one of them has been able to tell the judiciary that Vidocq has been a disloyal agent except the one " and he pointed to Champaix. "And yet that plaintiff has been several times before the courts and received just retribution for his actions."

The crowd cheered, but the panel of jurists under officiate Barbou were less impressed with the defense. Found guilty, Vidocq was sentenced to five years in prison and was fined 3,000 francs as added punishment. Paris was stunned.

But, no sooner had the echo of Barbou's gavel died away than the Court of Appeals threw out the verdict. Reviewing the case, the appellate ruled that Vidocq's conduct was entirely professional from beginning to end and that no subterfuge had been committed.

The following day, Vidocq's agency reopened for business. In the arched windows facing Galerie Vivienne smiling pedestrians read decorative signs of large scrolled letters reading, *Resurrection!*

Twilight Years

"Be it true or false, what is said about men often has as much influence upon their lives, especially upon their destinies, as what they do."

Victor Hugo

The last two decades of Eugene Francois Vidocq's life remained as busy as preceding years; venerable, he never surrendered his principles, and stayed alert and active to the end, when he died at 81 years old.

He wrote a series of novels based on his reminiscences as an investigator. One of the most memorable is *Les Voleurs* (The Criminals), which, more than anything else, is a close-up of Paris' underworld as seen through the eyes of a detective who traversed it. "Turning the pages, the dark world of the old criminals seems to rise about one like a vapor from a witches' cauldron," says biographer Philip John Stead. "And there is a good deal of the later Vidocq in it (who) came to believe that the criminal should be regarded as a sick man, not past cure, and who turned against the inhumanities of the Law." Certain historians believe that the great author Honore de Balzac, who became a personal friend of Vidocq's, may have written some of the more fluent pages.

Other works he penned, whose fictional cast of characters also greatly reflect on his own personality and experiences as a detective, are *Les Vrais Mysteres de Paris* (The True Mysteries of Paris) and *Les Chauffeurs de Nord* (The Chauffeurs of the North). Vidocq's sleuths are credited as the inspiration for Edgar Allen Poe's Daupin and Balzac's Vautrin, among others such as those created by the celebrated Parisian novelist Victor Hugo. More so, and quite complimentary to his talent for tale spinning, Vidocq's books are considered the central genesis of the European detective novel to come.

While his written works received applause in his native France, it was actually Great Britain that craved them. In the United Kingdom, law enforcement officers were greatly respected, unlike French *gendarmes* of the time who were oft viewed as puppet figures of a conniving monarchy. Scotland Yard in London drew reverence; the plainclothes inspector was highly regarded for ingenuity and loyalty to adulated Queen Victoria.

British bookstores and newspapers had already made him a hero by the time he toured England on a promotional tour in 1845; as well, British theatre had headlined the Vidocq name in several stage plays based on his *Memoirs*.

The Regent Street Cosmorama featured the visiting Vidocq himself in his own exhibition of original artwork he had amassed over the years and, the real clincher, his personal collection of artifacts associated with crime. To gawking Londoners he displayed several disguises he had worn when with the Surete, along with weapons, clothing, utensils and instruments of torture once owned by or used upon name criminals. The suspenders worn by Fieschi when he attempted to assassinate Louis-Philippe, a frock worn by killer Lacenaire on his climb up the guillotine steps these were two of Vidocq's diverse assortment. Admission cost five shillings per person and Londoners lined up around the Cosmorama for days.

Upon his return to Paris he decided to go into semi-retirement, but continued to accept as many cases as a 70-year-old man could handle. He even performed a few investigative jobs for upper-crust society outside of France. But, when his wife Fleuride passed away in his arms in September of 1847, some of the heart went out of him. He closed his agency on the Galerie Vivienne, sold his country estate at Sainte-Mande, and moved into a smaller house in the Marais district of Paris.

It is fitting that a man who saw so many political changes in the city he loved, and had served as a champion D'Artagnan through all of them, should live through another. An uprising in 1848 crushed the monarchy and the country became a republic. "Attempts to set up a new government were dogged by riot," according to Michelin's guide to Paris, "and in June, 1848, the National Guard slew some 4,000 workers in the Faubourg-Sainte-Antoine. Louis-Napoleon emerged as President." As Vidocq had always swayed to the side of the politics he thought best for France, he once again was there cheering when Louis-Napoleon rode into Paris. Over the next few years, in his seventies and despite failing health, he went undercover again and again to investigate potentially dangerous parties for the Department of the Interior.

In late April, 1857, he was struck at home with a paralysis. Friend and neighbor, Dr. Dornier, who had cared for him through his old age, rushed to his bedside with a local Catholic priest, Pere Orssant. For days, both men kept vigil over him. On May 11, Vidocq asked forgiveness for not having attended Mass since a boy; the priest assured him God would be forgiving. Then, the dying man touched the hand of Dr. Dornier and whispered his final words, "You...you...my only physician."



The resting place of Vidocq
(The Travel Diary)

The funeral that was held the following day at the Basilica de Sainte-Denys was a small one. Most of the great men he had known were gone before him, and his remaining friends from life were there in attendance. Above him, the spectacular, colored lead-glass windows of the church reinvented the bright sunlight and bathed the coffin below in a reverential blue.

That day, people remembered him, France remembered him, and the citizens wept. Even a few of the criminals who had survived him, they wept too. Now, what eulogies were spoken that day, none better expressed the man Vidocq than those spoken about himself many years before when addressing an august body of lawmakers:

"I have the consolation of having remained an honest man amid the darkness of perversion and the atmosphere of crime. I have fought for the defense of order, in the name of justice, as soldiers fight for the defense of their country, beneath the flag of their regiment. I had no epaulettes, but I ran as many risks as they, and I exposed my life every day as they do."

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