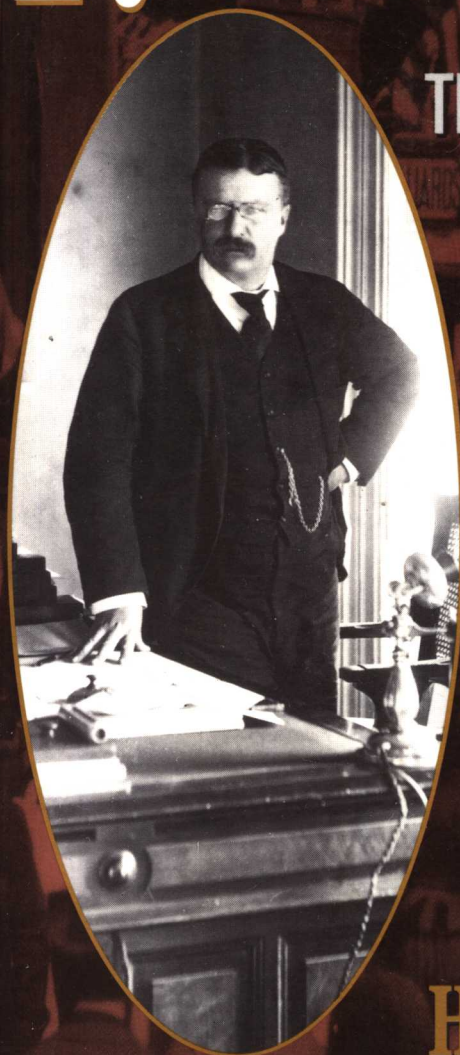


"Jeffers captures the public-spirited Theodore Roosevelt in all his pugnaciousness."
—*Publishers Weekly*

COMMISSIONER ROOSEVELT

THE STORY OF
THEODORE ROOSEVELT
AND THE NEW YORK
CITY POLICE,
1895-1897



H. PAUL JEFFERS

Commissioner Roosevelt

**The Story of
Theodore Roosevelt and
the New York City Police,
1895–1897**

H. PAUL JEFFERS



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*For my friend and colleague in news
through 25 years of covering the good and bad
of New York's cops and politicians,
Ed Rickards*

I have the most important, and the most corrupt,
department in New York on my hands. I shall speedily
assail some of the ablest, shrewdest men in this city,
who will be fighting for their lives, and I know well
how hard the task ahead of me is.

—THEODORE ROOSEVELT, MAY 5, 1895

Preface

When I was growing up in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, and exploring the shelves of the town's library, I encountered two men who became my life's heroes. One seemed so amazing that he ought to have been fictional: Theodore Roosevelt. The other I knew to be imaginary, yet I felt as if he really lived: Sherlock Holmes.

In 1978, as I pondered the daring task of writing my first mystery novel, I combined the two into a detective yarn dealing with a politically motivated murder in New York City in 1880. This was the year TR graduated from Harvard, and Holmes, according to his "biography," was in the city as a touring actor, honing skills of makeup and performance that would prove to his advantage as the sleuth of Baker Street, commencing the following year.

I picked 1880 out of cowardice. I did not wish to stumble into grievous error by writing about TR fifteen years later when he was Police Commissioner and Sherlock Holmes when he would have had fourteen years of history jotted down by Dr. John H. Watson. I called the book *The Adventure of the Stalwart Companions*.

Having taken on TR in the pages of a fiction, I hoped for a nonfiction author to write about his two years in Mulberry Street so I could read it. There existed Roosevelt biographies that devoted a chapter or so to the subject, but I wanted to know more. Ultimately, when no such work devoted to Mulberry Street appeared to be at hand or forthcoming, and by then having done some nonfiction authoring myself, I decided to write it.

For general illumination I turned at the start to TR's memoirs and general biographies. But what is frequently absent in autobiographies, official records, and other sources is detail and color of everyday things: the weather on a given date, what someone was wearing, a mood, a look, the decor of a room, smells, sounds, and the whole panoply of life and its events as they are played out. For these one must turn to history shot on the wing—that is, contemporary journalism.

For as complete a day-by-day account of Theodore Roosevelt's two years as police commissioner there exists no better contem-

poraneous source than *The New York Times*. Even in 1895–1897 it prided itself on being a newspaper of record. The detailed coverage was astonishing and captivating to read. Articles proved to be painstakingly complete, enlightening, occasionally surprising, and frequently amusing and witty. As one whose adult life was in large part spent in a journalism career, I was awed by the ability of these gatherers of news a century ago to produce transcripts of meetings, courtroom proceedings, interviews, descriptions of action, dialogue, and news events, and with an obvious respect for the English language that one does not always encounter in the journalism of today, especially in electronic media.

Reading 100-year-old next-day accounts of the events of TR's two years as police commissioner, I found myself beside him as he shouted *Hier bin ich* while relishing being lampooned by German-Americans who resented his taking away their Sunday beer; tramping along on the midnight rambles as he caught slacking coppers flatfooted and then called them on the carpet in his second-floor office for their derelictions; feeling outraged with him and Jake Riis as they inspected slums; eavesdropping on the squabbles with the mystifying antagonist of the second act of this drama, Andrew Parker—all through the unerring eyes, words, wit, and humor of reporters with nothing to aid them but notebooks and pencils.

Having written the book that I hoped would turn out to be the one I had always wanted to read, about TR and his Mulberry Street blues, I searched for a gemlike quotation to end it and to sum him up. Finally, I settled on a passage written by Vincent Starrett about that other personality of the 1890s whom I met in a library long ago—Sherlock Holmes—whose name I have substituted with that of the main character of this book.

“Let us speak, and speak again, of TR. For the plain fact is, that the imperishable Mr. Theodore Roosevelt is still a more commanding figure in the world than most warriors and statesmen in whose present existence we are invited to believe.”

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Prologue

Mr. Steffens Gets an Assignment

Dodging horses, omnibuses, carriages, a few bicycles, and a swarm of pedestrians as he dashed across Broadway, twenty-six-year-old Lincoln Steffens found himself badly in need of work. Just back from several years studying in Europe, the lean and lanky figure with a wife to support had been welcomed back to the America of 1892 by a startlingly energizing letter from his father in California.

The elder Steffens pointed out that when his son had finished school and had wanted to go to college he had paid his tuition at Berkeley. "When you got through there, you did not care to go into my business," he went on. "You preferred to continue your studies in Berlin. I let you."

After that came Heidelberg and Leipzig. Then Paris and a year of studying among the French. Next he had to have half a year of the British Museum in London. The father had assented.

"You must know about all there is to know of the theory of life," said the senior Steffens, "but there's a practical side as well. I suggest that you learn it, and the way to study it, is to stay in New York and hustle."

He enclosed a hundred dollars, "until you can find a job."

Believing he possessed the makings of a writer, Steffens tried his hand at authorship. To his surprise and encouragement he sold a short story he had dashed off in three days. *Harper's Magazine* paid him fifty dollars. Emboldened, he tried again but without repeating the success. Running out of his father's money, he dressed up daily in a beautiful morning coat with top hat to answer advertisements for anything connected to writing, only to promptly discover that

people looked with suspicion on his claim to a college education, and not only from one college, but five.

Dispiritedly turning to a business associate of his father with connections to the newspapers of Park Row, he obtained a letter of introduction to an editor of the New York *Evening Post*. Housed in a ten-story, red brick building at Broadway and Fulton Street across Manhattan's busiest intersection from the city's oldest church, St. Paul's, and a short walk from City Hall, the paper had been founded in 1801 by Alexander Hamilton with the intention of strengthening the Federalist Party. Its first editor, William Coleman, proved himself to be a crusader with plenty of righteous causes to champion, from quackery and patent medicines to the cruel hoaxes known as lotteries that picked the pockets of the poor. After Coleman, carrying on such campaigning on behalf of the public interest, William Cullen Bryant led the *Post* to declare against slavery as early as 1840, then broke with the Democrats by supporting the newly organized Republican Party in 1856, and backed Lincoln for president of the United States four years later. As editor he had been the first to suggest that a vast, open, derelict piece of Manhattan real estate stretching north from Fifty-ninth to 110th Street, known as "Shantytown," be cleared and turned into a great promenade and open-air resort.

Twenty years after Frederick Law Olmstead and Calvert Vaux transformed that vision into Central Park and three years after Bryant's death, in 1878, railway builder Henry Villard took over the newspaper and placed it in the hands of E. L. Godkin, as editor in chief. Irish-born, English in both his culture and political liberalism, and against bad government and "yellow journalism," he put out a conservative three-cent evening paper that assiduously shunned the seamy scandals, sensationalism, and crime found in the one-cent papers. In 1892 his political targets were Tammany Hall of the Democrats, and their boss, Richard Croker, and the Republican state machine of Boss Thomas C. Platt.

City editor of the *Post* on the morning Steffens presented himself was Henry J. Wright. "I don't need any more reporters," he said huffily, "but you can come in next Monday and sit down out there with the reporters, and as I get a chance, I'll try you out."

Having told his wife he had found a job, Steffens took his place in the city room on the appointed day and waited while all those around him bustled with journalistic activity as reporters received

assignments. Untried but undaunted that day, he returned the next and waited again, catching a glimpse of Mr. Godkin as the famed editor passed by the door and ignored him, as did all the “interesting fellows” who actually had news to cover and who seemed to know all the mysteries of the great city outside.

“They did not talk much,” Steffens would recall thirty-nine years later in his autobiography, “but I overheard enough to infer that they were familiar and bored with sport, politics, finance and society. I was awed by the way they would, upon a few words from the city editor, dart or loaf out of the room, be gone an hour or so, come in, report briefly, and then sit down, write, turn in their copy carelessly, and lie back and read, idly read, newspapers.”

More than anything he had ever wished in his life, he longed to be like them.

Several days later, Wright came into the room around one o'clock, looked around, saw no one but Steffens, exclaimed impatiently and went out. Returning a moment later, he muttered, “See here, Steffens, there's a member of a stockbrokerage firm missing. Disappeared utterly. Something wrong. Go and see his partner and find out why the man is gone, whether there's money missing, too.”

When he interviewed the broker, the man admitted, “My partner has not only skipped, he has taken every cent there was in the office, in the banks, and—then some.”

Judging Steffens to be “reliable, quick and resourceful,” Wright immediately hired him as a regular reporter, launching Steffens on “a series of daily adventures, interesting, sometimes thrilling” that in the course of a few months took him to all parts of the city, calling on all sorts of men and women, meeting politicians and businessmen, covering fires, accidents, fights, strikes, and meetings. He found journalism in New York to be “a great swimming hole into which every day I dived, here, there, anywhere, and swam around for something or somebody worth getting.” He came to love the business, politics, and streets of the brawling city that cared neither for him nor for itself.

On the strength of his success with the absconding broker, he was called upon to fill in for the ailing *Post* reporter whose beat was Wall Street, in time to cover the Panic of 1893. Reporting one of the great periodic depressions in the history of the United States, he pictured himself “sailing through the storm on the bridge with the officers of the ship” with the cool eye and detachment of the unin-

volved observer. "Having no prejudice for or against finance," he said, "I had no judgment, no point of view. I was only a reporter reporting."

When the regular Wall Street reporter reclaimed his beat Steffens found himself consigned again to general reporting, until another afternoon when Wright beckoned him to the city desk to ask a question that was so startling it left Steffens almost breathless: "How would you like to cover police headquarters?"

Located in a large stone building at 300 Mulberry Street in the heart of the city's most atrocious tenement district, the police department headquarters housed the four members of the board of police commissioners, inspectors, and captains who commanded the rank and file of the force and the detective bureau. Source of all crime news, headquarters was the clearing house for eager reporters seeking details of the misdemeanors and felonies of the more than 1.5 million people living upon forty-two square miles (twenty-two of them being the island of Manhattan), stretching from the Battery to Yonkers.

In this melting pot of disparate immigrants from all over the world the 1890 census had listed 400,000 Irish, nearly that many Germans, 25,000 Italians, and 10,000 Chinese. Largely Roman Catholic and poor, the population declined at an annual death rate of twenty-five per one thousand.

To maintain law and order in this conglomeration of humanity the police department operated thirty-six police stations with a force of about 3,600 patrolmen, roundsmen, and officers.

For Steffens "the police" represented a dark and mysterious layer of the life of the great city that he had not penetrated. Contemplating Wright's enticing offer, he envisioned himself going to Mulberry Street as he had gone to Wall Street, as he had gone to Europe, and as he had come home to America, "with the suppressed ardor of a young student and with the same throbbing anxiety that an orator feels just before he rises to speak." But speaking to Steffens at the moment was his city editor, Henry Wright, forcefully laying down the rules for the exciting new assignment in cautioning terms that clipped the fledgling police reporter's wings. "The *Evening Post* is not turning into a one-penny yellow sheet," the editor warned. "The *Post* does not cover crime. You are not going up to Mulberry Street to report murders and robberies. Pay no attention

to crime. You are being assigned to cover the activities of the Reverend Parkhurst."

Anyone who read one of New York's fifty daily newspapers, two hundred seventy weeklies and periodicals, and three hundred fifty journals and magazines had heard of the slight, respectably bearded minister of the staid Madison Square Presbyterian Church. The Rev. Dr. Charles H. Parkhurst had been the biggest news story in the city since Sunday, February 14, 1892, when he had ascended into the pulpit of the Gothic brownstone church at Madison Avenue and Twenty-fourth Street to deliver a sermon entitled "Ye Are the Salt of the Earth." By its end the preacher had astounded the congregation with the charge that "in its municipal life, our city is thoroughly rotten."

The government, he exclaimed, constituted "a damnable pack of Administrative bloodhounds that are fattening themselves on the ethical flesh and blood of our citizenship." City leaders, he declared to the thunderstruck upturned faces in the pews, had become "a lying, perjuring, rum-soaked, and libidinous lot of polluted harpies" who under the guise of governing the city were "feeding day and night on its quivering vitals."

Turning his attention to the chief elected official at city hall, he pointed a rhetorical, accusatory finger at Mayor Hugh J. Grant: "Every effort to make men respectable, honest, temperate and sexually clean is a direct blow between the eyes of the mayor and his whole gang of drunken and lecherous subordinates."

Directing a lightning bolt in the direction of District Attorney De Lancey Nicoll, he charged that the office pledged to maintaining the law showed "no genius in ferreting out crime," prosecuting only when it had to, and "with a mind so keenly judicial that almost no amount of evidence was accepted as sufficient to warrant an indictment."

Even more shocking, Parkhurst accused "the guardians of the public peace and virtue, vulgarly known as the police," with being a force of corrupt bribe takers. "Your average policeman, or your average police captain," he said in outraged tones, "is not going to disturb a criminal, if the criminal has means. It is the universal opinion of those who have studied longest and most deeply into the municipal criminality of this city, that every crime has its price."

What had provoked such an outburst of hellfire, brimstone, and

damnation from a clergyman renowned for his mild manner and frequently sleep-inducing, harmless sermon? What had possessed a fifty-year-old, slightly built, and near-sighted scholar with a degree from Amherst, and a command of Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit to use his secure and prestigious ministry to the cream of New York society to rail against the personalities of city government, and to brand them a generation of vipers?

While some of Parkhurst's Presbyterians may have speculated as to whether their pastor had experienced a mystical Epiphany to catapult him into the pulpit that Sunday morning, the genesis of the tirade had been Dr. Parkhurst's assumption two years earlier of the leadership of the Society for the Prevention of Crime. Organized in 1878, this association of progressive citizens had as its purpose the improving of social conditions that they deemed to be the corrosive roots of youth involvement in crime and vice.

Finding the Society virtually moribund, Parkhurst launched himself into a study of "the gambling evil and the social evil." What he discovered was not only unexpected but appalling. Rather than walking into the welcoming arms of a police department eager for his help, he discovered that an organization he had "supposed existed for the purpose of repressing crime had for its principal object to protect and foster crime and make capital out of it."

Demanding that the Society henceforth deal with the police as its "arch-antagonist," he insisted in April 1891 that he become the society's president and that it adopt a policy toward the police department of "making with it no alliance and giving it no quarter." He even provided a motto: "Down with the police."

Having set such a course, he headed inexorably to the sermon he delivered several months later. Courageous though it had been, Lincoln Steffens viewed Parkhurst's decision to publicly attack the police as quite perilous. "They were dangerous allegations; libelous," he noted. Unless they could be proved true.

Because the accusations had been laid at the feet of the top officials of the city, Parkhurst's charges amounted to indictment of the political organization that put them in office—Tammany Hall, traditional archenemy of successive editors of Alexander Hamilton's paper, and now nemesis of Steffens' boss, E. L. Godkin.

Regarding Rev. Parkhurst's tirade, Steffens noted with disarming understatement, "The *Post* was interested."

Calling upon Parkhurst, he informed him of his assignment and

suggested that they both might benefit if they were to work together and exchange confidences. Interpreting Steffens' presence as at least tacit endorsement by the *Post* of his efforts to clean up city government, Parkhurst readily agreed to cooperate with Steffens. Spending several mornings describing his plans and methods to the attentive reporter, the meek-looking, fearlessly crusading preacher embellished his sermon's allegations with illuminating portraits of the leading personalities of the police department, and the depth and breadth of their corruption.

As the eager young newspaperman drank in the minister's tales, he became convinced that Dr. Parkhurst knew what he was talking about—although the minister had not been able to produce proof sufficient to persuade a grand jury to return indictments of the persons he had denounced in his sermon.

"After a few talks with Dr. Parkhurst," Steffens wrote in his autobiography, "I felt that I knew both the police officers and their worst crimes, and so, with no little dread and a solid foundation, I went one morning early to police headquarters with my card to present to the Superintendent of Police."

In professional reputation, public esteem, and personal fame not even the late-blooming notoriety of Rev. Parkhurst approached that of Thomas J. Byrnes. Indeed, no detective, including those of England's heralded Scotland Yard and the renowned agency of Allan Pinkerton—whose motto was "We never sleep," and whose symbol was a wide-open eye that ultimately provided the American lingo of hard-boiled crime writers with the term "private eye"—had reaped the accolades of the fifty-year-old top cop of the New York City Police Department.

By the time Steffens called upon Byrnes in 1893, the man the *New York Times* called the greatest thief taker in the history of the New York police had been head of the detective bureau since its inception. Born in Ireland on June 15, 1842, he had emigrated to America as a child, received little formal education, and had spent his growing years on the streets of the Fifth Ward where he ran with a gang of street brawlers attached to Hose Company No. 21 of the city's volunteer fire department. At the outbreak of the Civil War he enlisted in Ellsworth's Zouaves and fought at the first battle of Bull Run. Leaving the army after two years when the Zouaves disbanded, he returned to New York and looked to the police department for employment. Appointed a patrolman on December 10,

1863, he was assigned to the Third Precinct station house in Chambers Street. Five years later, having proved his mettle as a thief taker and peacekeeper, he was promoted to the rank of roundsman. Again proving his competence, he was rewarded with elevation to captain in 1870. After another decade of exceptional performance he was invited to put away the blue outfit of the uniformed force to be fitted for the cutaway suit and top hat of the Detective Bureau. Ten years later he stood in command of it.

Summoning reporters to his office in 1884, he boasted of the crime-fighting record his detectives had achieved under his leadership. "During the four years before I took charge of the detectives 1,943 arrests were made and 505 years of convictions secured," he told them, "whereas, for the four years I have been in charge 3,324 arrests were made and 2,428 years in conviction were secured."

He then led the newspapermen across the hall for a guided tour of what he called "the Mystery Chamber." A roomful of the memorabilia and souvenirs of cases solved by the men of the detective bureau, it was described by Richard Wheatley for readers of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in 1887 as "a shuddering horror," offering photographs that were "speaking likenesses" of all sorts of criminals "glaring from the walls." Displayed in cabinets and on shelves he found the implements of human crime and depravity, ranging from a sledgehammer and powder-flasks used to plunder the Manhattan Bank of nearly three million dollars in cash, bonds, and securities in 1878—a case which Byrnes solved—to "pipes, lamps, liquid raw opium and pills used for smoking in opium joints."

Crediting Byrnes, Wheatley asserted, "Crooks are now afraid of their shadows; great robberies have ceased, and minor crime has been reduced over eighty percent."

How did Byrnes achieve such results? He told Wheatley, "I make it a point to meet some of these men (criminals) in their resorts, and learn from them the whereabouts of their friends, and what they are doing. One crook of consequence generally knows what other good men are doing. In this way I keep posted, and know in what part of the country all the sharp men are. In the long-run the honest officer is a match for the smartest thief."

So confident had Byrnes become in his reputation as a superb policeman that in 1888, as Scotland Yard's entire detective force searched in vain for Jack the Ripper, he boasted that if London's killer of prostitutes who called himself "Saucy Jack" turned up in

New York he would be caught “soon enough,” presumably by Tom Byrnes himself.

“My business is shrouded in mystery,” he told one interviewer, “and the more difficult it is to unravel the harder I work.”

But not all this success came about because of superlative sleuthing. As frequently as Byrnes and his detectives employed their minds to crack a case, they resorted to intimidation and physical abuse of suspects. They coined a term for it: “the third degree.” Defending the technique, Byrnes told *Collier's* magazine, “I believe in any method of proving crime against a criminal,” to which the writer of the article added, “His very manner, the size of him, the bark in his voice, his menacing shoulders and arms would terrorize the average crook.”

Should Byrnes detect in a criminal suspect an above average intelligence, the third degree was likely to be modified to put the suspect, in the Chief of Detectives' words, “into the state of mind of the man in Poe's story ‘The Telltale Heart,’ wherein he can't help believing that proof of his guilt has been discovered and that his cross-examiners are mocking him by pretending not to be aware of it. The third degree should be a psychic rather than a physical process.”

Having cultivated an intimate knowledge of New York City's criminal element, and every den of iniquity in each of its most sinister and dangerous neighborhoods—from the gang-breeding Five Points on the East Side to the aptly-named Hell's Kitchen on the shore of the Hudson River—Byrnes had gotten to know burglars, robbers, swindlers, confidence men, forgers, shoplifters, pick-pockets, receivers of stolen goods, cut-throats, and killers by sight and by name. Consequently, when he rose to head the detective force in 1880, he set out to enshrine that knowledge by the creation of a catalog of photographs of such miscreants, thereby adding to the law enforcement dictionary the pithy term “Rogues' Gallery.” In 1886 he included many of those photos, along with colorful essays on the criminals and their crimes, in a best-selling book, *Professional Criminals in America*.

Within one thick volume for detectives, vulnerable businessmen, and ordinary people to study were bank sneak Rufus Minor; forger Charles Becker; John Larney, alias Mollie Matches, pick-pocket; Emil Voegtlin, boarding house thief; highwayman Daniel Hunt; Mary Hoey, Ellen Clegg, Lena Kleinschmidt, Mary Connelly,