

New York World
August 1, 1894

Byrnes And Nellie Bly

He Tells Her All and She Enlightens Him Considerable

The First Among Detectives

This He Cannot Deny, But His Only Joy in & Year Is Five Days in a Catboat

He Isn't Afraid To Face Anybody

The Qualities Which Make a Perfect Detective About the Same as Those Which Make a Perfect Angel—No Dreaming or Reading for Him

Supt. Byrnes is a pretty big man. He knows it, and what's more, his enemies know the same thing.

He was very emphatic when I asked him if he was afraid of anybody upon this little measly earth.

"Are You The Greatest Detective In The World"

"I never did a d—thing in all my life that made me afraid to face any man, great or small," he said, as he tilted himself back in his chair and looked at me defiantly over a palm-leaf fan.

That's a great thing to be able to say and swear to! There are lots of people just now who would like to be able to say the same of themselves.

Of course Byrnes is the greatest detective in the world. Honest men think it and dishonest men know it.

"The Superintendent" is a bashful man and doesn't like to speak of himself, so I did not ask what he thought were the qualities of disposition which won him success, but covered the subject with a question less personal.

"What quality is most important to make a perfect detective?" I asked.

"I don't think," he said, fanning with energy, "you could get down to one qualification. It is a combination of certain qualities that tend to make a good detective. But I should say the two most necessary qualities are intelligence and tenaciousness, combined with a natural instinct for that particular kind of business. If a man hasn't a liking for detective business he never can be taught. A detective above all other things must be hopeful; he must never get despondent or downhearted. If he doesn't take reverses as a matter of course he will never make a success. You take a line and start it here and put the other end in Jersey. Well, if a man goes to work on it and

the line breaks he must be able to patch it up and find the end or he's no good. If he gets disheartened because the line broke he will never be a detective."

"Detectives are not born," he reminded me, "though born with certain qualifications which help them to become detectives. Saying a man is intelligent and tenacious, he must also know thieves, their mannerisms and associates, how their different bands are made up and all such things. That knowledge must be acquired, and a man who does not possess it cannot be a successful detective."

Mr. Byrnes looked so unlike the ideal detective, the detective of fiction and the more horrible amateur detective, that I began to long to ask him one great big question, one that has been answered by everybody else, but which I wanted to hear him answer.

I watched him swaying the big fan back and forth; I gazed into his mild blue eyes; I noted that faint smile which played just one line where the end of his long, drooping gray moustache touched the cheek. I noted that his collar was immaculate, that it was a standing collar and that it was as high as Berry Wall's which is, I assure my readers, the up-to-date height and exactly what it should be.

I also saw that the insufferably hot day had not produced the faintest symptoms of wilt, but that the collar stood as firm as when it left the master hands of an ironer.

I saw all this, and besides I noticed that the pattern of his black-and-white check tie was carried out in his trousers and that he wore a thin black coat, and that his hat at the other side of the room was a new straw with a broad blue band.

Now this man sitting there and calmly waving a palm-leaf fan was so unlike the piercing-eyed, sharp-voiced, wig-disguised ideal detective that I leaned forward in my chair and ejaculated wonderingly.

"Are you the greatest detective in the world?"

"Well" he gasped and stopped. The fan was held motionless, and the blue eyes regarded me very strangely.

"Of course I know you are," I hurried to add. "Everybody knows it, and I just wondered if you did."

"Well," he repeated, "you are an awful nice girl. I shouldn't say—"

He stopped, and I waited breathless for him to continue, but he merely resumed his fanning, saying:

"You mustn't ask me."

Then I thought I could get him in another way, so I asked quietly:

"Who, in your opinion is the first detective in the world?"

I thought possibly "the Superintendent" would say somebody was the second, but he did not. He evaded it deftly by saying:

"Well, the world is such a large place. I could not answer the question fairly."

His blue eyes began to twinkle and the fan raised a perfect hurricane.

"Of what class of detectives did you want to know which was the greatest? There are detectives and detectives," he explained, "all of them good detectives, and yet belonging to distinctively different classes of work. A detective who may be at the head in his class in looking after the prevention of crime may be utterly useless in the detection of crime. In European countries they even have more kinds of detectives than we do. There are the political detectives, men of birth and education, who move in the highest society in order to be able to get at men of exalted positions. We do not have that class of detectives in America."

"What detective have you most admired?"

“Do you mean in reality or in fiction?” he demanded quickly.

“Both.”

“The Superintendent” laughed.

“I am afraid to say,” he declared, earnestly. “There are so many good ones that I might offend some if I named one. In fiction, all of them are so very bad, in my judgment, that I wouldn’t like to name any for fear I might offend the author.”

“What do you think of woman detectives?” I asked, going off on another theme.

“I do not approve of woman detectives and we use them here very seldom. I don’t think a good woman would be a detective, and a bad woman can’t be trusted. A woman of the world will tell a husband or a lover pretty nearly all she knows. She will tell because she can’t keep a secret or because she wants to impress him with her importance and with what she knows.

“I don’t say this as a matter of sentiment, but I think women are totally unfit for detective work and should be engaged in something else. I’ve had them once in awhile. Woman detectives can be made as the demand requires. But I never got any good work from them. I never had a woman to do anything for me that she didn’t always get the best of it.”

The greatest living detective looked tired, but a thought struck him. He said: “There are none of us so great that we don’t have to depend on others to help us. I’m always willing to help anybody, and I do it when I can.” Then he talked on. He said that women have the worst of it in this world, no matter how they are situated.

“And so I am always willing,” he said, “that the woman criminals I meet should always get a shade the best of it with me.”

I asked “the Superintendent” what he considered his greatest pieces of detective work and he wouldn’t tell me, but he did tell me once before what he liked best to do.

It was this:

“The thing that is the most difficult and hardest to accomplish.”

That is what fascinates him most, and he will stick at it until he gets it.

“The Superintendent” has never been molested in his life, but he receives as many as four or five letters a day from persons threatening him bodily harm.

He doesn’t mind them.

Ill-spelled and badly written threats are not the only letters that come from unknown persons to the Superintendent. His mail is large and is without doubt the most varied that any man gets. Many, many letters, written heaven knows why, would ruin many homes and lives if they were sent to a less scrupulous man.

What power they would give the Superintendent if he made use of them no man can easily estimate.

But the foolish writers who betray themselves or their friends need not tremble for the consequences of their folly. They should profit by their escape and learn forever the danger of pen and paper.

“The Superintendent” is a good man and would save his foolish correspondents from themselves. He works seven days in the week. He would only work six if it was not for the folly of his correspondents.

The seventh day in the week is devoted to their salvation. “The Superintendent” goes to his office, and locked in alone, reads and destroys his weekly mail. Not a single letter is saved. The secrets he knows, secrets that would keep the world in a state of excitement for many years if doled out to them in dally doses of a page each, are in his head, and when he dies they will die with him.

“When I am gone,” he said to me, as he glanced over his desk, “not a single letter will be found to betray or compromise one single person.”

This man, “The Superintendent,” as the world knows him, seems possessed of unfailing health. He works 300 days every year and has done so for the last thirty years.

The five days he rests, simply rests and nothing more. He always spends it in the country, where he tries to forget everything, except that he is fond of a catboat.

That is the only thing he is fond of in the way of amusement, and he does smile so happily when he talks of catboat joys.

“I just like to crawl into a twenty-one foot cat,” he said gleefully.

“With a couple of old hams and knock around all day and come home dead tired when it’s night. That’s fun, and that’s all the fun I get out of an entire year.”

Edison declares that sleep is only a matter of habit. Byrnes almost proves this theory. He rises every morning of his life at 6 o’clock. If he goes to bed at 5 in the morning, which he does frequently, he gets up at 6 just the same without feeling the slightest sleepiness.

No difference how much sleep he loses, he does not feel or show any signs of it, yet when he does sleep he sleeps solidly, without a dream.

He has a home life, of course. A very sweet home life it is. He lives in a handsome house in Fifty-eighth Street, just west of Fifth Avenue and very close to Cornelius Vanderbilt.

Supt. Byrnes has five children, all girls. The eldest is eighteen years old, and graduated last spring.

I had a real estate man who declared he was not superstitious tell me that the Superintendent moved into a house numbered 13. He vowed the number would bring bad luck, and when the Superintendent’s only boy died the man said:

“I told you so!”

Since the death the houses have been renumbered, and 13 is no longer 13. The Superintendent says that he is not superstitious and had nothing to do with the changing of the number, even refusing to sign a petition to that effect.

I don’t think the United States is very far advanced in the way of expert criminals, but just the same I was curious to know who is America’s greatest criminal.

“That can’t be answered,” the Superintendent said, because crime is classified. A man who is a skilled burglar as a confidence man is no good whatever, and a man who can pick a pocket would be utterly helpless in breaking a bank. Not one of them is really successful. If one makes a success it is for a very short period. The alternative which soon comes is jail or death.”

“Do you know any criminals who have reformed and have become business men?”

“I know some who are trying to do business,” he said, but added, with a laugh, “but I’d hate to give them a chance on any sure thing.”

“Do you think any innocent men are ever hanged?”

“I shouldn’t think, with all the safeguards that are thrown around capital cases, that it would be possible for an innocent man to be executed. I’ve read of such cases, but never came across one in my experience.”

“Do you know any famous female criminals?”

“I know so many,” he declared, solemnly, “that if I named one I would offend others. They have a great pride in their profession, you know, and one counts herself worse than another and is correspondingly happy and proud.”

The Superintendent is 5 feet 10½ inches tall. He is fifty-two years old, and his face is almost without a wrinkle. Only at times do they show, but they shortly disappear again.

There are several lines—not deep ones—on his forehead, which is high and growing higher. There is a track of gray hairs that stand straight up, as if to defy Time to advance any further in their direction. They are few, but defiant, and I believe it will be some years yet before “the Superintendent’s” head is shining bald.

“The Superintendent” doesn’t have any more time to read when he wakes than he has to dream when he sleeps. He once owned a pair of horses, and liked them, but he grew tired of them in time.

He drops into a theatre occasionally and “sees an act,” but rarely sees a play through.

When he dies I believe his spirit will haunt headquarters.

Perhaps he has faults. I am not saying he hasn’t, for there is no man that ever amounted to anything who did not possess some very big, glaring faults.

Faults or no faults, there is no man New York can spare less. When “the Superintendent” dies it will be a bad day for New York.