



FROM THE BAG

We'll always have Paris.

Rick Blaine

Casablanca (1942)

pictured: The Eiffel Tower, as seen from
Trocadéro Palace during the Paris Exposition in 1889.



THE PURLOINED LETTER

(PART ONE)

Edgar A. Poe

Lawyers should read this old but still accessible detective story for three reasons, at least. First, while it is often cited by legal writers – practitioners, judges, scholars – for the proposition that contraband can be hidden in plain sight, some of them seem to lack an accurate recollection of the elements of the story they are citing. We lawyers can do better than that. Second, the longstanding focus on the hidden-in-plain-sight idea has obscured the story’s citeability for other aspects of law and lawyering. Consider, for example, the anecdote of Abernethy at the end of the first part of the story. *See* page 91 below. It will resonate with any lawyer who has family or friends who value good legal advice but don’t do so in dollars. Third, it is a pleasure to read – it is a good tale, well told. That without more should be sufficient reason to get to know it better. The first part of the story – up to the cliffhanger – is printed here. The second part will appear in the next issue of the *Green Bag*. We have preserved, to the best of our abilities, the punctuation and spelling in the original. *See* Edgar A. Poe, *The Purloined Letter*, in *THE GIFT: A CHRISTMAS, NEW YEAR, AND BIRTHDAY PRESENT* 41-50 (1845). A disclaimer: Republication of this ancient work does not constitute endorsement of Poe’s unkind characterization of the people of Naples – indeed, we emphatically decry it.

– *The Editors*

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) was a writer.

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AT PARIS, just after dark one gusty evening in the autumn of 18—, I was enjoying the twofold luxury of meditation and a meerschaum, in company with my friend C. Auguste Dupin, in his little back library, or book-closet, *au troisième, No. 33, Rue Dunôt, Faubourg St. Germain*. For one hour at least we had maintained a profound silence; while each, to any casual observer, might have seemed intently and exclusively occupied with the curling eddies of smoke that oppressed the atmosphere of the chamber. For myself, however, I was mentally discussing certain topics which had formed matter for conversation between us at an earlier period of the evening; I mean the affair of the Rue Morgue, and the mystery attending the murder of Marie Roget. I looked upon it, therefore, as something of a coincidence, when the door of our apartment was thrown open and admitted our old acquaintance, Monsieur G—, the Prefect of the Parisian police.

We gave him a hearty welcome; for there was nearly half as much of the entertaining as of the contemptible about the man, and we had not seen him for several years. We had been sitting in the dark, and Dupin now arose for the purpose of lighting a lamp, but sat down again, without doing so, upon G.'s saying that he had called to consult us, or rather to ask the opinion of my friend, about some official business which had occasioned a great deal of trouble.

"If it is any point requiring reflection," observed Dupin, as he forbore to enkindle the wick, "we shall examine it to better purpose in the dark."

"That is another of your odd notions," said the Prefect, who had a fashion of calling every thing "odd" that was beyond his comprehension, and thus lived amid an absolute legion of "oddities."

"Very true," said Dupin, as he supplied his visiter with a pipe, and rolled towards him a very comfortable chair.

"And what is the difficulty now?" I asked. "Nothing more in the assassination way, I hope?"

"Oh no; nothing of that nature. The fact is, the business is very simple indeed, and I make no doubt that we can manage it sufficiently well ourselves; but then I thought Dupin would like to hear the details of it, because it is so excessively *odd*."

"Simple and odd," said Dupin.

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“Why, yes; and not exactly that, either. The fact is, we have all been a good deal puzzled because the affair *is* so simple, and yet baffles us altogether.”

“Perhaps it is the very simplicity of the thing which puts you at fault,” said my friend.

“What nonsense you *do* talk!” replied the Prefect, laughing heartily.

“Perhaps the mystery is a little *too* plain,” said Dupin.

“Oh, good heavens! who ever heard of such an idea?”

“A little *too* self-evident.”

“Ha! ha! ha! – ha! ha! ha! – ho! ho! ho!” roared out our visiter, profoundly amused, “oh, Dupin, you will be the death of me yet!”

“And what, after all, *is* the matter on hand?” I asked.

“Why, I will tell you,” replied the Prefect, as he gave a long, steady, and contemplative puff, and settled himself in his chair. “I will tell you in a few words; but, before I begin, let me caution you that this is an affair demanding the greatest secrecy, and that I should most probably lose the position I now hold, were it known that I confided it to any one.”

“Proceed,” said I.

“Or not,” said Dupin.

“Well, then; I have received personal information, from a very high quarter, that a certain document of the last importance, has been purloined from the royal apartments. The individual who purloined it is known; this beyond a doubt; he was seen to take it. It is known, also, that it still remains in his possession.”

“How is this known?” asked Dupin.

“It is clearly inferred,” replied the Prefect, “from the nature of the document, and from the non-appearance of certain results which would at once arise from its passing *out* of the robber’s possession; – that is to say, from his employing it as he must design in the end to employ it.”

“Be a little more explicit,” I said.

“Well, I may venture so far as to say that the paper gives its holder a certain power in a certain quarter where such power is immensely valuable.” The Prefect was fond of the cant of diplomacy.

“Still I do not quite understand,” said Dupin.

“No? Well; the disclosure of the document to a third person, who shall be nameless, would bring in question the honour of a personage of most

exalted station; and this fact gives the holder of the document an ascendancy over the illustrious personage whose honour and peace are so jeopardized.”

“But this ascendancy,” I interposed, “would depend upon the robber’s knowledge of the loser’s knowledge of the robber. Who would dare —”

“The thief,” said G, “is the — Minister D—, who dares all things, those unbecoming as well as those becoming a man. The method of the theft was not less ingenious than bold. The document in question — a letter, to be frank — had been received by the personage robbed while alone in the royal *boudoir*. During its perusal she was suddenly interrupted by the entrance of the other exalted personage from whom especially it was her wish to conceal it. After a hurried and vain endeavour to thrust it in a drawer, she was forced to place it, open as it was, upon a table. The address, however, was uppermost, and the contents thus unexposed, the letter escaped notice. At this juncture enters the Minister D—. His lynx eye immediately perceives the paper, recognises the handwriting of the address, observes the confusion of the personage addressed, and fathoms her secret. After some business transactions, hurried through in his ordinary manner, he produces a letter somewhat similar to the one in question, opens it, pretends to read it, and then places it in close juxtaposition to the other. Again he converses, for some fifteen minutes, upon the public affairs. At length, in taking leave, he takes also from the table the letter to which he had no claim. Its rightful owner saw, but, of course, dared not call attention to the act, in the presence of the third personage who stood at her elbow. The minister decamped; leaving his own letter — one of no importance — upon the table.”

“Here, then,” said Dupin to me, “you have precisely what you demand to make the ascendancy complete — the robber’s knowledge of the loser’s knowledge of the robber.”

“Yes,” replied the Prefect; “and the power thus attained has, for some months past, been wielded, for political purposes, to a very dangerous extent. The personage robbed is more thoroughly convinced, every day, of the necessity of reclaiming her letter. But this, of course, cannot be done openly. In fine, driven to despair, she has committed the matter to me.”

“Than whom,” said Dupin, amid a perfect whirlwind of smoke, “no more sagacious agent could, I suppose, be desired, or even imagined.”

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“You flatter me,” replied the Prefect; “but it is possible that some such opinion may have been entertained.”

“It is clear,” said I, “as you observe, that the letter is still in possession of the minister; since it is this possession, and not any employment, of the letter, which bestows the power. With the employment the power departs.”

“True,” said G—; “and upon this conviction I proceeded. My first care was to make thorough search of the minister’s hotel; and here my chief embarrassment lay in the necessity of searching without his knowledge. Beyond all things, I have been warned of the danger which would result from giving him reason to suspect our design.”

“But,” said I, “you are quite *au fait* in these investigations. The Parisian police have done this thing often before.”

“O yes; and for this reason I did not despair. The habits of the minister gave me, too, a great advantage. He is frequently absent from home all night. His servants are by no means numerous. They sleep at a distance from their master’s apartments, and, being chiefly Neapolitans, are readily made drunk. I have keys, as you know, with which I can open any chamber or cabinet in Paris. For three months a night has not passed, during the greater part of which I have not been engaged, personally, in ransacking the D— Hotel. My honour is interested, and, to mention a great secret, the reward is enormous. So I did not abandon the search until I had become fully satisfied that the thief is a more astute man than myself. I fancy that I have investigated every nook and corner of the premises in which it is possible that the paper can be concealed.”

“But is it not possible,” I suggested, “that although the letter may be in possession of the minister, as it unquestionably is, he may have concealed it elsewhere than upon his own premises?”

“This is barely possible,” said Dupin. “The present peculiar condition of affairs at court, and especially of those intrigues in which D— is known to be involved, would render the instant availability of the document – its susceptibility of being produced at a moment’s notice – a point of nearly equal importance with its possession.”

“Its susceptibility of being produced?” said I.

“That is to say, of being *destroyed*,” said Dupin.

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“True,” I observed; “the paper is clearly then upon the premises. As for its being upon the person of the minister, we may consider that as out of the question.”

“Entirely,” said the Prefect. “He has been twice waylaid, as if by footpads, and his person rigorously searched under my own inspection.”

“You might have spared yourself this trouble,” said Dupin. “D—, I presume, is not altogether a fool, and, if not, must have anticipated these waylayings, as a matter of course.”

“Not *altogether* a fool,” said G—, “but then he’s a poet, which I take to be only one remove from a fool.”

“True;” said Dupin, after a long and thoughtful whiff from his meerschaum, “although I have been guilty of certain doggrel myself.”

“Suppose you detail,” said I, “the particulars of your search.”

“Why the fact is, we took our time, and we searched *every where*. I have had long experience in these affairs. I took the entire building, room by room; devoting the nights of a whole week to each. We examined, first, the furniture of each apartment. We opened every possible drawer; and I presume you know that, to a properly trained police agent, such a thing as a *secret* drawer is impossible. Any man is a dolt who permits a ‘secret’ drawer to escape him in a search of this kind. The thing is *so* plain. There is a certain amount of bulk – of space – to be accounted for in every cabinet. Then we have accurate rules. The fiftieth part of a line could not escape us. After the cabinets we took the chairs. The cushions we probed with the fine long needles you have seen me employ. From the tables we removed the tops.”

“Why so?”

“Sometimes the top of a table, or other similarly arranged piece of furniture, is removed by the person wishing to conceal an article; then the leg is excavated, the article deposited within the cavity, and the top replaced. The bottoms and tops of bedposts are employed in the same way.”

“But could not the cavity be detected by sounding?” I asked.

“By no means, if, when the article is deposited, a sufficient wadding of cotton be placed around it. Besides, in our case, we were obliged to proceed without noise.”

“But you could not have removed – you could not have taken to pieces *all* articles of furniture in which it would have been possible to make a

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deposit in the manner you mention. A letter may be compressed into a thin spiral roll, not differing much in shape or bulk from a large knitting-needle, and in this form it might be inserted into the rung of a chair, for example. You did not take to pieces all the chairs?”

“Certainly not; but we did better – we examined the rungs of every chair in the hotel, and, indeed, the jointings of every description of furniture, by the aid of a most powerful microscope. Had there been any traces of recent disturbance we should not have failed to detect it *instanter*. A single grain of gimlet-dust, or saw-dust, for example, would have been as obvious as an apple. Any disorder in the glueing – any unusual gaping in the joints – would have sufficed to insure detection.”

“Of course you looked to the mirrors, between the boards and the plates, and you probed the beds and the bed-clothes, as well as the curtains and carpets.”

“That of course; and when we had absolutely completed every particle of the furniture in this way, then we examined the house itself. We divided its entire surface into compartments, which we numbered, so that none might be missed; then we scrutinized each individual square inch throughout the premises, including the two houses immediately adjoining, with the microscope, as before.”

“The two houses adjoining!” I exclaimed; “you must have had a great deal of trouble.”

“We had; but the reward offered is prodigious.”

“You include the *grounds* about the houses?”

“All the grounds are paved with brick. They gave us comparatively little trouble. We examined the moss between the bricks, and found it undisturbed.”

“And the roofs?”

“We surveyed every inch of the external surface, and probed carefully beneath every tile.”

“You looked among D—’s papers, of course, and into the books of the library?”

“Certainly; we opened every package and parcel; we not only opened every book, but we turned over every leaf in each volume, not contenting ourselves with a mere shake, according to the fashion of some of our police officers. We also measured the thickness of every book-*cover*, with the

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most accurate admeasurement, and applied to them the most jealous scrutiny of the microscope. Had any of the bindings been recently meddled with, it would have been utterly impossible that the fact should have escaped observation. Some five or six volumes, just from the hands of the binder, we carefully probed, longitudinally, with the needles.”

“You explored the floors beneath the carpets?”

“Beyond doubt. We removed every carpet, and examined the boards with the microscope.”

“And the paper on the walls?”

“Yes.”

“You looked into the cellars?”

“We did; and, as time and labour were no objects, we dug up every one of them to the depth of four feet.”

“Then,” I said, “you have been making a miscalculation, and the letter is *not* upon the premises, as you suppose.”

“I fear you are right there,” said the Prefect. “And now, Dupin, what would you advise me to do?”

“To make a thorough re-search of the premises.”

“That is absolutely needless,” replied G—. “I am not more sure that I breathe than I am that the letter is not at the Hotel.”

“I have no better advice to give you,” said Dupin. “You have, of course, an accurate description of the letter?”

“Oh yes!” – And here the Prefect, producing a memorandum-book, proceeded to read aloud a minute account of the internal, and especially of the external, appearance of the missing document. Soon after finishing the perusal of this description, he took his departure, more entirely depressed in spirits than I had ever known the good gentleman before.

In about a month afterwards he paid us another visit, and found us occupied very nearly as before. He took a pipe and a chair, and entered into some ordinary conversation. At length I said, –

“Well, but G—, what of the purloined letter? I presume you have at last made up your mind that there is no such thing as overreaching the Minister?”

“Confound him, say I – yes; I made the re-examination, however, as Dupin suggested – but it was all labour lost, as I knew it would be.”

“How much was the reward offered, did you say?” asked Dupin.

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“Why, a very great deal – a *very* liberal reward – I don’t like to say how much, precisely; but one thing I *will* say, that I wouldn’t mind giving my individual check for fifty thousand francs to any one who could obtain me that letter. The fact is, it is becoming of more and more importance every day; and the reward has been lately doubled. If it were trebled, however, I could do no more than I have done.”

“Why, yes,” said Dupin, drawlingly, between the whiffs of his meerschauam, “I really – think, G—, you have not exerted yourself – to the utmost in this matter. You might – do a little more, I think, eh?”

“How? – in what way?”

“Why – puff, puff – you might – puff, puff – employ counsel in the matter, eh? – puff, puff, puff. Do you remember the story they tell of Abernethy?”

“No; hang Abernethy!”

“To be sure! hang him and welcome. But, once upon a time, a certain rich miser conceived the design of spunging upon this Abernethy for a medical opinion. Getting up, for this purpose, an ordinary conversation in a private company, he insinuated his case to the physician, as that of an imaginary individual.”

“‘We will suppose,’ said the miser, ‘that his symptoms are such and such; now, doctor, what would *you* have directed him to take?’

“‘Take!’ said Abernethy, ‘why, take *advice*, to be sure.’”

“But,” said the Prefect, a little discomposed, “I am *perfectly* willing to take advice, and to pay for it. I would *really* give fifty thousand francs, every *centime* of it, to any one who would aid me in the matter!”

“In that case,” replied Dupin, opening a drawer, and producing a check-book, “you may as well fill me up a check for the amount mentioned. When you have signed it, I will hand you the letter.”

I was astounded. The Prefect appeared absolutely thunder-stricken. For some minutes he remained speechless and motionless, looking incredulously at my friend with open mouth, and eyes that seemed starting from their sockets; then, apparently recovering himself in some measure, he seized a pen, and after several pauses and vacant stares, finally filled up and signed a check for fifty thousand francs, and handed it across the table to Dupin. The latter examined it carefully and deposited it in his pocket-book; then, unlocking an *escritoire*, took thence a letter and gave it to the

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Prefect. This functionary grasped it in a perfect agony of joy, opened it with a trembling hand, cast a rapid glance at its contents, and then, scrambling and struggling to the door, rushed at length unceremoniously from the room and from the house, without having uttered a solitary syllable since Dupin had requested him to fill up the check.

When he had gone, my friend entered into some explanations.

To be continued . . .

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