

A FAMOUS SHORT STORY.

The Purloined Letter.

At Paris, just after dark one gusty evening in the autumn of 18—, I was enjoying the two-fold luxury of meditation and a meerschaum, in company with my friend, C. Auguste Dupin, in his little back library, or book closet, on a trousseau, No. 3 Rue Dupin, Faubourg 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 Rogot. 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— 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.

"It is a very simple matter," said Dupin, as he forebore to enquire into 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 everything "odd" that was beyond his comprehension, and thus lived amid an absolute legion of "oddities."

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

And what is the difficulty now? I asked. "Nothing 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 exceedingly odd."

"Simple and odd," said Dupin. "Why, yes; and not exactly that, either. The fact is, we have all been a great 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! ha! ha! ha! ho!" roared our visitor, 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 this is an affair demanding the strictest secrecy, and that I should most probably lose my position if it were known that I confided it to any one."

"Proceed," said I.

"Well, then, I have received personal information from a very high quarter, that a certain document of 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 most 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."

"But 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 honor of a person of most exalted station; and this fact the holder of the document an ascendancy over the illustrious personage whose honor and peace are so jeopardized."

"But this ascendancy," interposed, "would depend on 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, whose 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 endeavor to thrust it in a drawer, she was forced to place it, upon it was, upon a table."

The address, however, was uppermost, and the contents thus unexpressed, the letter escaped notice. At this juncture enters the Minister D—. His lynx eye immediately perceives the paper, recognizes 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 making 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 person, who stood at her elbow, the minister desisted, 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 in a manner 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 retaining her secret. But this, of course, cannot be done openly. In fine, driven to despair, she has committed the matter to me."

"Then," said Dupin, amid a perfect whirlwind of smoke, "no more sagacious agent could, I suppose, be desired or even imagined."

"You flatter me," replied the prefect;

"but it is possible that some such opinion may have been entertained."

"But," said I, "you are quite at fault in these investigations. The Parisian police have done this thing often before."

"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 apartment, and being chiefly Neapolitans, are readily made drunk. I have keys, as you know, with which I can open any number of 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 honor 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 the intrigues in which D— is known to be involved, would render the instant availability of the document—its momentary 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.

"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 is a poet, which I take to be only one remove from a fool."

"True," said Dupin, after a long and delightful whiff from his meerschaum.

"Proceed," said I.

"Or not," said Dupin.

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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 most accurate admeasurement, and applied to each the most jealous scrutiny of the microscope. Had we ruled the findings been recently modified 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 beyond 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."

"Then," I said, "you have been making a miscalculation, and the letter is not upon the premises, as you supposed."

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

"To make a thorough research of the premises."

"That is absolutely needless," replied G—. "I am not more sure than I breathe that 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 had 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 what of the purloined letter? I presume you have at last made up your mind that there is no such thing as over-reaching the Minister."

"Confound him, say I—yes! I made the re-examination, however, as Dupin suggested; but it was all labor lost, as I knew it would be."

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

"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 getting my share of it."

"You might—do a little more, I think," he said.

"How? In what way?"

"Why? (putt, putt) you might (putt, putt) employ counsel in the matter, eh? (putt, putt, putt). Do you remember the story they tell of Abernethy?"

"No; hang Abernethy!"

"To be sure; hang him and welcome. But, to be sure, a honest, certain, rich miser conceived the design of spurning upon the 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 illness."

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

"Why, the fact is, we took our time, and we searched everywhere. 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 the furniture, the drawers 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 in a room, who has 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. The fiftieth part of a line could not escape us. After the cabinets were probed with the fine, long needles you have seen, the empty drawers were 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 manner. The fiftieth part of a line could not escape us. After the cabinets were probed with the fine, long needles you have seen, the empty drawers were removed the tops."

"By no means, if, when the article is deposited, a sufficient wadding of cotton be placed around it. Besides, the drawers, when they 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 deposit in the manner you mention. A letter may be compressed into a thin spiral rod, not differing much in shape or bulk from a large knitting-needle, and the hole in which it is 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 joinings 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 instantly. A single grain of gink-dust, for example, would have been as obvious as an apple. Any disturbance in the bluing—any unusual color to the wood—would have sufficed to mature detection."

"I presume 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 surface of every chair, and 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 in the hotel, and indeed, the joinings of every description of furniture by the aid of a most powerful 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?"

"The grounds are paved with brick. They gave us comparatively little trouble. We examined the moss between the bricks, and found it undisturbed among D—'s papers, of course, and into the boxes 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 most accurate admeasurement, and applied to each the most jealous scrutiny of the microscope. Had we ruled the findings been recently modified 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."

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