

The Purloined Letter

CHARACTERS

- AUGUSTE DUPIN**, brilliant amateur detective
TRUDEAU, Dupin's roommate
CHIEF GIRBAUD, chief of the Paris police department
MADAME D, member of the French royalty
OFFICER BERNARD, one of Girbaud's detectives
NARRATOR, Trudeau recalling the events

SCENE 1

NARRATOR: It was a cool evening in Paris in 1842. I was in the sitting room when Dupin came in and shut off the lights.

TRUDEAU: I beg your pardon, Dupin. . .

DUPIN: I beg *your* pardon, Trudeau. But I must think. And the dark is the best place for it.

TRUDEAU: Oh, very well. I'll just sit here too, then. And think.

NARRATOR: Luckily, just a few minutes later someone came knocking at our door. It was Girbaud, Paris's chief of police.

DUPIN: Girbaud! What a surprise. We haven't seen you for — how many years has it been, Trudeau?

TRUDEAU: Many years!

DUPIN: Yes, many years! Come in and entertain us, Girbaud. Have a seat. I'll light the lamp.

GIRBAUD: I'm not here for entertainment, Dupin. I've called to ask your opinion about some official business that has caused a great deal of trouble.

DUPIN: Ah. Then I shall *not* light the lamp. The dark is the place to think about truly important matters.

GIRBAUD: Another of your odd notions, Dupin.

NARRATOR: Girbaud had a habit of labeling as "odd" anything that he didn't understand. As a result, he was surrounded by "oddities."

TRUDEAU: What difficulty are you faced with, Girbaud?

GIRBAUD: The fact is, the business is very simple indeed. I'm sure

we can manage it sufficiently well ourselves. But I thought Dupin would like to hear the details of it, because it is so excessively odd.

DUPIN: Simple and odd?

GIRBAUD: Yes. The fact is, we have all been a good deal puzzled because the affair is so simple, and yet it baffles us.

SCENE 2

NARRATOR: From there, Chief Girbaud's story got quite confusing. The man has a way of complicating everything. As he continued his tale, we moved into the kitchen for a snack.

DUPIN: Perhaps it is the very simplicity of the thing that is getting in your way? Maybe the mystery is a little *too* plain.

CHIEF (laughing): What nonsense! You'll be the death of me yet!

TRUDEAU: Enough of this. What exactly is the mystery?

GIRBAUD: I will tell you. But before I begin, let me warn you that this is an affair that demands the greatest secrecy. I would probably lose my job if anyone learned I had spoken about it.

TRUDEAU: Proceed.

GIRBAUD: A document of great importance has been purloined from the royal apartments. The person who purloined it is known beyond a doubt. He was seen taking it. It is also known that he still has the document.

DUPIN: How do you know that?

GIRBAUD: The disclosure of the document to a certain person — whom I won't name right now —

would harm the reputation of another very important person. This fact gives the man who stole the document a certain power over the important person whose reputation is in jeopardy. In other words, the thief is using the document to blackmail the woman he stole it from. . .

DUPIN: Girbaud, halt your speech. I must hear the story as you heard it — from the person whose document was purloined. I advise you to send for her immediately.

GIRBAUD: No, that would be entirely improper. As I said, she holds a position of royalty.

DUPIN: Well, then I can't help.

GIRBAUD: However, I can probably arrange for us to pay a very short visit to her chamber.

TRUDEAU: Let's get on with it then.

SCENE 3

NARRATOR: Chief Girbaud led us to the woman's chamber. The decorations, the quality of the servants, the general air of the place left no doubt that we were in the presence of royalty. As such, it would be wrong to reveal the woman's name. We shall refer to her as Madame D.

MADAME D: The thief is Minister DuPont.

DUPIN: Very well. But more important is how he came into possession of the document. Tell us.

MADAME D: I had received a letter of a . . . very sensitive nature. I can't say whom it was from. As I was reading it, someone entered the room — call that person Mr. X. It was very important to me that Mr. X not know that I had received this letter. I first thought of shoving the letter into a drawer, but I was afraid that would draw attention to it.

TRUDEAU: Very wise assumption!

MADAME D: Thank you. So instead, I put the letter back into its enve-

lope and set it down on the desk with the address facing up. Just then, Minister DuPont entered the room. What a horror!

DUPIN: Indeed. I know him well. I am not fond of him either.

MADAME D: Well, he immediately recognized the handwriting on the envelope. Then he noticed how uncomfortable I was. He must have guessed correctly at the subject of the letter. He talked with me and, uh, Mr. X about the business he had come for. But while he talked, he casually put a letter of his own on my desk — right next to my letter.

DUPIN: Ah, I can see where this is going. Let me guess. When he was ready to leave, he casually picked up the wrong letter — the letter you wanted to conceal from Mr. X — and took it with him. You were powerless to stop him because you did not want to alert your husband . . . oh, I mean Mr. X, to the existence of the purloined letter.

MADAME D: Exactly right.

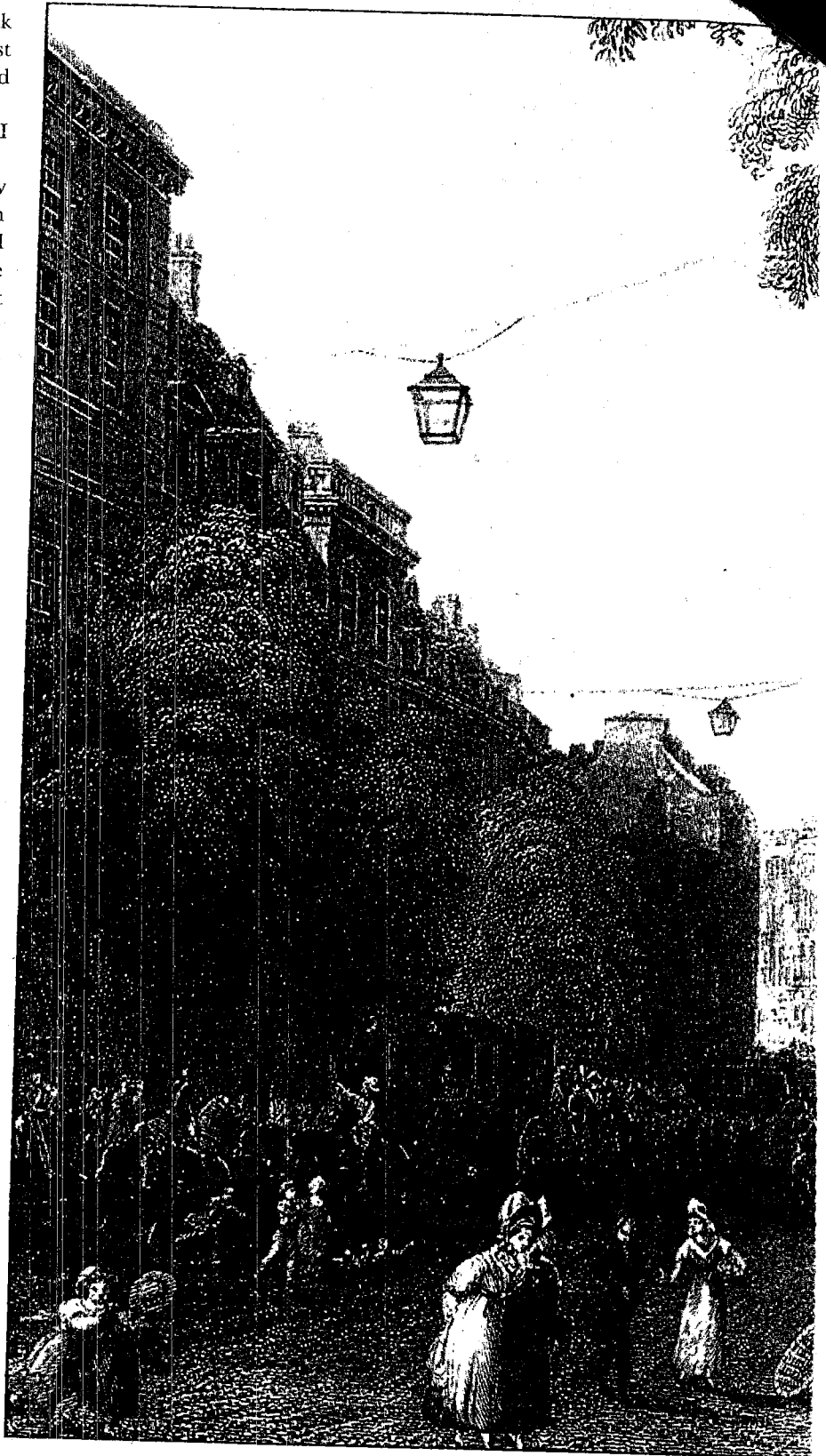
GIRBAUD: Now Minister DuPont is using the knowledge of the letter against Madame D. He is trying to force her to use her considerable political influence. . .

MADAME D: Please don't discuss the details, Girbaud. Gentlemen, just believe me when I say I *must* have that letter back. And now I leave you to your work.

SCENE 4

NARRATOR: We retreated to Girbaud's office. There, he introduced us to Officer Bernard, a detective who had been working on the case. The four of us discussed the matter.

DUPIN: Girbaud, you are right when you say DuPont must still have the letter. If he showed it to anyone, it would lose its power. Also — the letter must be either



on his person or in his apartment. He would want to keep it under his watchful eye.

GIRBAUD: Yes. And it was on those assumptions that I based our investigation, right Bernard?

BERNARD: Yes. Let me tell you what we've done. First, and most important, we have searched DuPont's apartment top to bottom. We have done this every night for the last three weeks.

DUPIN: Of course, you have concealed this from DuPont. The Parisian police are very good at that sort of thing.

GIRBAUD: Of course. And as you know, I have keys for every door and cabinet in Paris.

BERNARD: And we've also searched DuPont himself. We had undercover officers pose as muggers and search through his pockets and belongings. They found nothing.

DUPIN: That was a waste of time. I'm sure he anticipated your search. He's not a fool.

GIRBAUD: Not *altogether* a fool. But he is a poet, which to me is only one step removed from a fool.

DUPIN: I suppose. Although I have dabbled a little myself. . .

TRUDEAU: Bernard, describe the details of your search of DuPont's apartment.

BERNARD: We took our time and searched everywhere. I devoted at least two nights to each room.

TRUDEAU: Two nights to each room! You've gone to a great deal of trouble!

GIRBAUD: Yes. But the reward offered is huge.

BERNARD: We took our time and searched everywhere. We opened every possible drawer.

GIRBAUD: You know, to a trained police agent, such a thing as a "secret" drawer is impossible. Any man is a dolt who allows a "secret" drawer to escape him in

a search of this kind.

DUPIN: Quite. I presume also that you looked to the mirrors, between the boards and the plates, and you probed the beds and the bedclothes, as well as the curtains and carpets.

BERNARD: Of course. We scrutinized each individual square inch throughout the premises of the apartment, including the two houses immediately adjoining.

TRUDEAU: You explored the floors beneath the carpets? The pages of the books? The cellars? The paper on the walls?

BERNARD: Yes. All of that. We not only opened every book, but we turned over every page in each volume — we didn't just shake them. We also measured the thickness of every book-cover and examined each one with a microscope. If any of the bindings had been meddled with, we would have known it!

TRUDEAU: You checked out the furniture?

BERNARD: Yes! We examined the rungs of every chair and the joints of every piece of furniture with another powerful microscope. Nothing! We found nothing!

TRUDEAU: Then you have been making a miscalculation. The letter is not in the apartment.

GIRBAUD: I fear you are right. And now, Dupin, what would you advise me to do?

DUPIN: To search the premises thoroughly once again.

GIRBAUD: That is unnecessary! I am positive that that letter is not in the apartment.

DUPIN: I have no better advice to give you. You have, of course, a description of the letter?

GIRBAUD: Yes. The envelope is 7 inches by 5 inches and cream colored. The paper is heavy and luxurious, as befits royalty. The envelope is addressed by a bold

hand in black ink. It was opened at the top, not the side, leaving the red wax seal unbroken.

SCENE 5

NARRATOR: About a month later, Girbaud appeared at our door again. He and Dupin and I chatted about nothing for a while. Then I posed the question.

TRUDEAU: Well, Girbaud. What of the purloined letter?

GIRBAUD: Confound that DuPont! I searched the apartment as you advised, Dupin. But as I expected, it was all for nothing.

DUPIN: How large was the reward, did you say?

GIRBAUD: I don't think I did say, precisely. And I'd better not say. But I will say this: I'd write a check for 50 thousand francs to anyone who could get me that letter. The reward has been doubled! But no matter what the reward, I can do no more.

DUPIN: Well, I'd say there's a *little* more you could do, Girbaud.

GIRBAUD: How? In what way?

DUPIN: Have you heard the story about Dr. Abernathy?

GIRBAUD: Oh, hang Abernathy.

DUPIN: Once upon a time a rich miser decided to sponge free medical advice from Abernathy. He got into a conversation with the doctor, then described his own case as if it were the case of a friend of his. "What should he take, Doctor?" the miser asked. Abernathy replied, "Why, he should take advice, to be sure."

GIRBAUD: But I'm perfectly willing to take advice and pay for it!

DUPIN: In that case, write me that check for 50 thousand francs. When you have signed it, I will hand you the letter.

NARRATOR: I was astonished, and Girbaud appeared thunderstruck. For a few minutes he just stared, openmouthed, at Dupin. When



he recovered himself, he took out his pen, wrote a check, and handed it across the table to Dupin.

DUPIN: Thank you, Girbaud.

NARRATOR: Then Dupin unlocked a drawer in his writing desk. With a flourish, pulled out a letter and handed it to Girbaud. Trembling, Girbaud examined the contents, and then, struggling to the door, rushed from the house without having uttered a word since Dupin had asked him to write the check.

SCENE 6

NARRATOR: After Girbaud had gone, Dupin explained.

DUPIN: The Parisian police are extremely skilled, in their own way. When Girbaud explained the search they'd conducted, I was confident that they'd done it properly — as far as they went.

TRUDEAU: What do you mean?

DUPIN: I mean that if the letter had been within the range of the search, the fellows would have found it. Girbaud's problem isn't his ability to search. It's that he does not understand the foundation of crime-solving.

TRUDEAU: What is that?

DUPIN: The detective must identify completely with his opponent. He must understand the crimi-

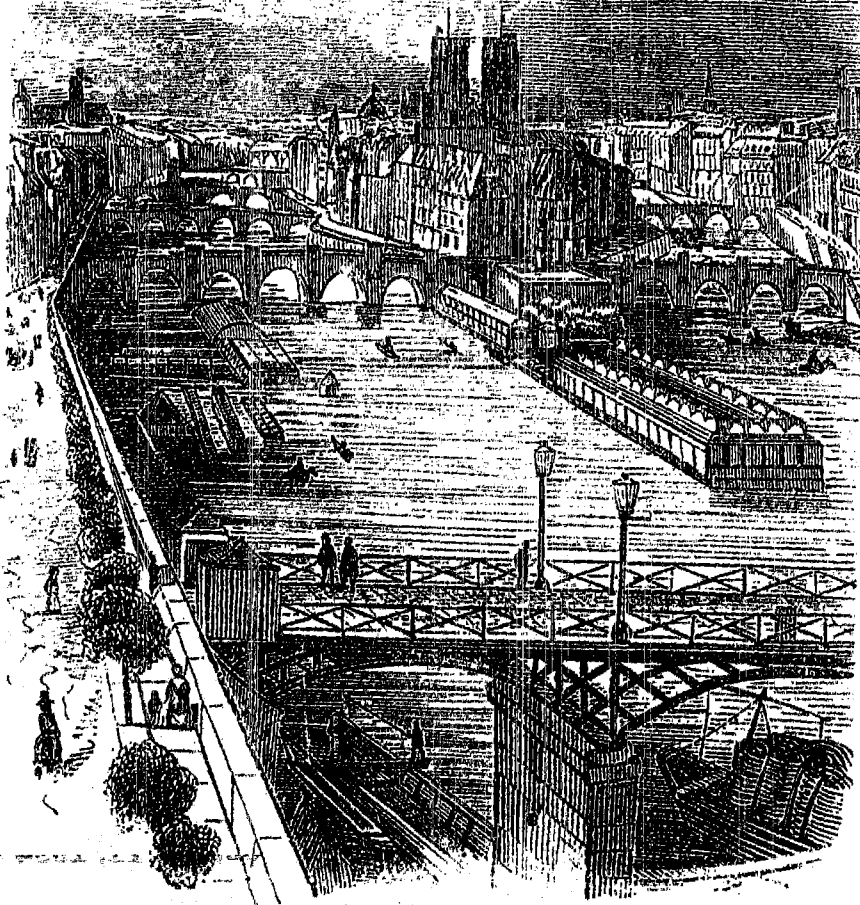
nal's way of thinking, and must try to think that way himself!

TRUDEAU: Ah! You're saying that Girbaud and his men are capable of thinking only one way.

DUPIN: That's right. They think like policemen. They tear apart the apartment. They look for hidden drawers. They peel back the wallpaper.

TRUDEAU: They assumed DuPont hid the letter in the way the policemen would have hidden it.

DUPIN: Exactly, Trudeau. And, to be fair, the way the policemen would have hidden the letter is the way most people would have hidden it. But DuPont is differ-



ent. He is a poet. A poet, a mathematician, and a bold politician.

TRUDEAU: Yes. Though he is a scoundrel, he is a man of considerable achievement.

DUPIN: The more I thought, the more I realized that DuPont was probably fully aware of Girbaud's searches. He probably looked forward to them, knowing that eventually Girbaud would give up — as he did — and decide that the letter was not in DuPont's apartment at all.

TRUDEAU: But where was it?

DUPIN: Du Pont came up with an ingenious solution. He didn't

conceal the letter at all!

TRUDEAU: What?!

SCENE 7

NARRATOR: Just as Dupin began to describe how he got hold of the purloined letter, Girbaud returned. Bernard was with him.

DUPIN: Gentlemen. I assume you want details.

BERNARD: Yes. Girbaud showed me the letter. I could not rest until I heard how you found it.

NARRATOR: I had to listen again to Dupin's preliminary explanation. Finally he got to the important part.

DUPIN: I came up with an excuse to visit DuPont in his apartment. He let me in, and I engaged him in a heated discussion of French politics. As he got worked up, I coolly surveyed the room.

GIRBAUD: No! The letter simply could not have been in that room, Dupin!

DUPIN: May I continue?

BERNARD: Yes. Please go on.

DUPIN: After a short time, I spotted an envelope that I decided must be the one you were searching for, Girbaud.

GIRBAUD: No...

DUPIN: It looked exactly *opposite* of the letter you described. It was soiled and torn, and made of cheap, common paper. The address — DuPont's own — was written in a mild, feminine hand. It was sealed with black wax. The letter was sitting in the open, at the top of a basket on DuPont's desk. It was the only messy scrap that marred the compulsive neatness of the room.

BERNARD: He concealed it by leaving it out on his desk, disguised as a common letter?

DUPIN: Precisely. The letter clashed so much with DuPont's surroundings, I knew it had been put there to deceive. So as I continued my conversation with DuPont, I memorized the exact appearance of the letter.

TRUDEAU: Why didn't you just take it?

DUPIN: I will get to that. Finally, I said good evening to DuPont, leaving a gold pillbox on the table.

BERNARD: So you'd have an excuse to return?

DUPIN: Yes. And I did return — the next day. With me I had an exact replica of the letter I'd seen on DuPont's desk. I created it here in our apartment, Trudeau. You did not notice a thing?

TRUDEAU: No. Not a thing.

DUPIN: So DuPont and I resumed our conversation of the previous day. Just as the conversation was becoming heated, we heard a loud explosion and the screams of a terrified mob. The commotion seemed to be directly beneath DuPont's windows. He rushed to the window to see what was going on. I took the opportunity to replace his letter with my exact replica.

BERNARD: What was going on outside?

DUPIN: A lunatic had fired a musket into the air. Of course, the lunatic was a perfectly sane man I'd hired to do the job.

TRUDEAU: I still don't understand why you replaced the letter with a copy. Wouldn't it have been better to take the letter openly?

DUPIN: DuPont is a desperate man, and a man of nerve. If I had made the wild attempt you suggest, I might not have left his apartment alive! But there are other reasons as well.

TRUDEAU: Politics?

DUPIN: Yes. In politics, I side with Madame D. But for the last months, DuPont has had her in his power. Now — though he doesn't know it — he is in *her* power. That will lead to his downfall, which is good. He is an unprincipled man of genius. I just wish I could be there when he realizes what's happened and reads my message in the envelope.

BERNARD: What does it say?

DUPIN: It's a simple message. "My revenge is better than your crime."

How does Dupin approach a problem? How does Chief Girbaud approach a problem? How do their methods differ? Is one method better than the other? Why or why not?

MYSTERY MAVERICK

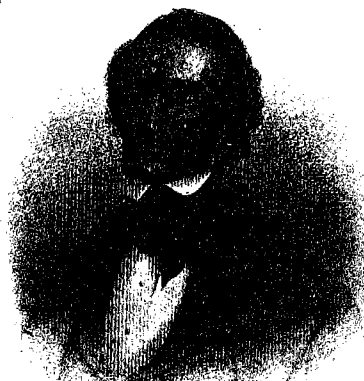


When Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) created Auguste Dupin, it was the first time anyone anywhere had written a detective story. Dupin paved the way for countless other fictional detectives — from Sherlock Holmes to Nancy Drew.

Part of the reason there were no detective stories before Poe wrote them is that real detectives hadn't been around that long. Before the 1800s, police didn't really try to solve

crimes. They mainly served as armed guards who protected people and property. When people started realizing that catching criminals and putting them in jail might help curb crime, "criminal investigation" departments started popping up in big cities in the United States and Europe.

In addition to his detective stories, Poe is famous for his poetry and chilling horror stories such as "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat." Poe was born in Boston. His parents, who were impoverished actors, died when he was very young. He was brought up by foster parents. Though he was a literary genius, Poe became addicted to drugs and alcohol as a young man, and was poor and unhappy most of his life. He died in Baltimore at the age of 40.



THE REAL MYSTERY



At the end of "The Purloined Letter," we learn how DuPont concealed the stolen letter from the police. That's one mystery solved. But the story doesn't provide the answer to a second mystery. We never find out what the letter said! Why did DuPont want

the letter so badly? Why did it give him power over Madame D? Stumped? Don't despair. There are some clues sprinkled throughout the story. They won't tell you the exact contents of the letter, but they do give you some idea.

Go back through the play and find the sections that hint at what the letter might say. Focus on what Chief Girbaud says and especially what Madame D says. Next, try to create a story in your mind that fits the evidence in the play and explains what the letter says and who wrote it. You'll have to rely on your imagination to fill in a lot of blanks. (For example, you'll have to decide for yourself exactly who "Mr. X" is.)

Next, put everything together and write the letter. When you're finished, you'll have solved the real mystery of "The Purloined Letter."

IF YOU LIKE MYSTERIES AND DETECTIVE STORIES,

check out one of these books.



RUBY IN THE SMOKE by Phillip Pullman. In London in the 1800s, 16-year-old Sally must solve the mystery of her father's death.

SING ME A DEATH SONG by Jay Bennett. Jason's mother will be executed for murder if he and a police detective can't prove she's innocent.

THE MURDER OF ROGER ACKROYD by Agatha Christie. In this classic detective story, eccentric Belgian detective Hercule Poirot solves his first case.