EDGAR ALLAN POE

POETRY AND TALES

ed. Patrick F. Quinn

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The Purloined Letter

Nil sapientiae odiosus acumine nimio.

Seneca

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 Dunois, 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 Rogêt. 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 bore 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 visitor with a pipe, and rolled towards him a comfortable chair.

"And what is the difficulty now?" I asked. "Nothing more in the assassination way, I hope?"
you demand to make the ascendency 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."

"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 auscult 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 apartment, 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 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
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 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 instantly. A single grain of gimlet-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."

"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 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.”

“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 most accurate admeasurement, and applied to each 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.”

“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 miss-

ing 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 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 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 meerschaum, “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; I am acquainted with Abernethy.”

“To be sure! hang him and welcome. But, once upon a time, a certain rich miser conceived the design of spurning 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 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 espritou, took thence a letter and gave it to the 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 syllable since Dupin had requested him to fill up the check.

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

"The Parisian police," he said, "are exceedingly able in their way. They are persevering, ingenious, cunning, and thoroughly versed in the knowledge which their duties seem chiefly to demand. Thus, when G—— detailed to us his mode of searching the premises at the Hotel D——, I felt entire confidence in his having made a satisfactory investigation—so far as his labors extended."

"So far as his labors extended?" said I.

"Yes," said Dupin. "The measures adopted were not only the best of their kind, but carried out to absolute perfection. Had the letter been deposited within the range of their search, these fellows would, beyond a question, have found it."

I merely laughed—but he seemed quite serious in all that he said.

"The measures, then," he continued, "were good in their kind, and well executed; their defect lay in their being inapplicable to the case, and to the man. A certain set of highly ingenious resources are, with the Prefect, a sort of Perseusian bed, to which he forcibly adapts his designs. But he perpetually errs by being too deep or too shallow, for the matter in hand; and many a schoolboy is a better reasoner than he. I knew one about eight years of age, whose success at guessing in the game of 'even and odd' attracted universal admiration. This game is simple, and is played with marbles. One player holds in his hand a number of these toys, and demands of another whether that number is even or odd. If the guess is right, the guesser wins one; if wrong, he loses one. The boy to whom I allude won all the marbles of the school. Of course he had some principle of guessing; and this lay in mere observation and admeasurement of the astuteness of his opponents. For example, an arrant simpleton is his opponent, and, holding up his closed hand, asks, 'are they even or odd?' Our schoolboy replies, 'odd,' and loses; but upon the second trial he wins, for he then says to himself, 'the simpleton had them even upon the first trial, and his amount of cunning is just sufficient to make him have them odd upon the second; I will therefore guess odd;'—he guesses odd, and wins. Now, with a simpleton a degree above the first, he would have reasoned thus: 'This fellow finds that in the first instance I guessed odd, and, in the second, he will propose to himself, upon the first impulse, a simple variation from even to odd, as did the first simpleton; but then a second thought will suggest that this is too simple a variation, and finally he will decide upon putting it even as before. I will therefore guess even;'—he guesses even, and wins. Now this mode of reasoning in the schoolboy, whom his fellows termed 'lucky,'—what, in its last analysis, is it?"

"It is merely," I said, "an identification of the reasoner's intellect with that of his opponent."

"It is," said Dupin; "and, upon inquiring of the boy by what means he effected the thorough identification in which his success consisted, I received answer as follows: 'When I
wish to find out how wise, or how stupid, or how good, or
how wicked is any one, or what are his thoughts at the mo-
ment, I fashion the expression of my face, as accurately as
possible, in accordance with the expression of his, and then
wait to see what thoughts or sentiments arise in my mind or
heart, as if to match or correspond with the expression. This
response of the schoolboy lies at the bottom of all the spu-
rrious profundity which has been attributed to Rochefoucault,
to La Bruyère, to Machiavelli, and to Campanella.

"And the identification," I said, "of the reasoner’s intellect
with that of his opponent, depends, if I understand you
right, upon the accuracy with which the opponent’s intellect
is admeasured."

"For its practical value it depends upon this," replied Du-
pin; "and the Prefect and his cohort fail so frequently, first,
by default of this identification, and, secondly, by ill-adme-
asurement, or rather through non-admeasurement, of the in-
tellect with which they are engaged. They consider only their
own ideas of ingenuity; and, in searching for anything hidden,
advocating only to the modes in which they would have hidden it.
They are right in this much—that their own ingenuity is a
faithful representative of that of the mass; but when the cul-
rning of the individual felon is diverse in character from their
own, the felon foils them, of course. This always happens
when it is above their own, and very usually when it is below.
They have no variation of principle in their investigations; at
best, when urged by some unusual emergency—by some ex-
traordinary reward—they extend or exaggerate their old
modes of practice, without touching their principles. What,
for example, in this case of D—, has been done to vary the
principle of action? What is all this boring, and sounding,
and scrutinizing with the microscope, and dividing
the surface of the building into registered square inches—
what is it all but an exaggeration of the application of the one
principle or set of principles of search, which are based upon
the one set of notions regarding human ingenuity, to which
the Prefect, in the long routine of his duty, has been accus-
tomed? Do you not see he has taken it for granted that all
men proceed to conceal a letter—not exactly in a gimlet-hole
bored in a chair-leg—but, at least, in some out-of-the-way
hole or corner suggested by the same tenor of thought which
would urge a man to secrete a letter in a gimlet-hole bored in
a chair-leg? And do you not see also, that such recherché
nuks for concealment are adopted only for ordinary oc-
casions, and would be adopted only by ordinary intellects; for,
in all cases of concealment, a disposal of the article con-
cealed—a disposal of it in this recherché manner,—is, in the
very first instance, presumable and presumed; and thus its dis-
covation depends, not at all upon the acumen, but altogether
upon the mere care, patience, and determination of the seek-
ers; and where the case is of importance—or, what amounts
to the same thing in the policical eyes, when the reward is of
magnitude,—the qualities in question have never been known
to fail. You will now understand what I meant in suggesting
that, had the purloined letter been hidden any where within
the limits of the Prefect’s examination—in other words, had
the principle of its concealment been comprehended within
the principles of the Prefect—its discovery would have been
a matter altogether beyond question. This functionary, how-
ever, has been thoroughly mystified; and the remote source
of his defeat lies in the supposition that the Minister is a fool,
because he has acquired renown as a poet. All fools are poets;
this the Prefect feels; and he is merely guilty of a non distributio medii in thence inferring that all poets are fools."

"But is this really the poet?" I asked. "There are two bro-
ers, I know; and both have attained reputation in letters. The
Minister I believe has written learnedly on the Differential
Calculus. He is a mathematician, and no poet."

"You are mistaken; I know him well; he is both. As poet
and mathematician, he would reason well; as mere mathe-
matician, he could not have reasoned at all, and thus would
have been at the mercy of the Prefect."

"You surprise me," I said, "by these opinions, which have
been contradicted by the voice of the world. You do not mean
to set at naught the well-digested idea of centuries. The mathe-
matical reason has long been regarded as the reason par ex-
cellence."

"Il y a a parler," replied Dupin, quoting from Chamfort,
"que toute idée publique, toute convention réelle, est une sottise,
car elle a convenu au plus grand nombre." The mathematicians,
I grant you, have done their best to promulgate the popular error to which you allude, and which is none the less an error for its promulgation as truth. With an art worthy a better cause, for example, they have insinuated the term 'analysis' into application to algebra. The French are the originators of this particular deception; but if a term is of any importance—if words derive any value from applicability—then 'analysis' conveys 'algebra' about as much as, in Latin, 'ambitus' implies 'ambition,' 'religio' 'religion,' or 'hominis honesti,' a set of honorable men."

"You have a quarrel on hand, I see," said I, "with some of the algebraists of Paris; but proceed." I dispute the availability, and thus the value, of that reason which is cultivated in any especial form other than the abstractly logical. I dispute, in particular, the reason educed by mathematical study. The mathematics are the science of form and quantity; mathematical reasoning is merely logic applied to observation upon form and quantity. The great error lies in supposing that even the truths of what is called pure algebra, are abstract or general truths. And this error is so egregious that I am confounded at the universality with which it has been received. Mathematical axioms are not axioms of general truth. What is true of relation—of form and quantity—is often grossly false in regard to morals, for example. In this latter science it is very usually untrue that the aggregated parts are equal to the whole. In chemistry also the axiom fails. In the consideration of motive it fails; for two motives, each of a given value, have not, necessarily, a value when united, equal to the sum of their values apart. There are numerous other mathematical truths which are only truths within the limits of relation. But the mathematician argues, from his finite truths, through habit, as if they were of an absolutely general applicability—as the world indeed imagines them to be. Bryant, in his very learned 'Mythology,' mentions an analogous source of error, when he says that 'although the Pagan fables are not believed, yet we forget ourselves continually, and make inferences from them as existing realities.' With the algebraists, however, who are Pagans themselves, the 'Pagan fables' are believed, and the inferences are made, not so much through lapse of memory, as through an unaccountable addling of the brains. In short, I never yet encountered the mere mathematician who could be trusted out of equal roots, or one who did not clandestinely hold it as a point of his faith that \(x^2 + px\) was absolutely and unconditionally equal to \(q\). Say to one of these gentlemen, by way of experiment, if please, that you believe occasions may occur where \(x^2 + px\) is not altogether equal to \(q\), and, having made him understand what you mean, get out of his reach as speedily as convenient, for, beyond doubt, he will endeavor to knock you down.

"I mean to say," continued Dupin, while I merely laughed at his last observations, "that if the Minister had been no more than a mathematician, the Prefect would have been under no necessity of giving me this check. I knew him, however, as both mathematician and poet, and my measures were adapted to his capacity, with reference to the circumstances by which he was surrounded. I knew him as a courtier, too, and as a bold intriguant. Such a man, I considered, could not fail to be aware of the ordinary policial modes of action. He could not have failed to anticipate—and events have proved that he did not fail to anticipate—the waylayings to which he was subjected. He must have foreseen, I reflected, the secret investigations of his premises. His frequent absences from home at night, which were hailed by the Prefect as certain aids to his success, I regarded only as ruse, to afford opportunity for thorough search to the police, and thus the sooner to impress them with the conviction to which G——, in fact, did finally arrive—the conviction that the letter was not upon the premises. I felt, also, that the whole train of thought, which I was at some pains in detailing to you just now, concerning the invariable principle of policial action in searches for articles concealed—I felt that this whole train of thought would necessarily pass through the mind of the Minister. It would imperatively lead him to despise all the ordinary nooks of concealment. He could not, I reflected, be so weak as not to see that the most intricate and remote recess of his hotel would be as open as his commonest closets to the eyes, to the probes, to the gimlets, and to the microscopes of the Prefect. I saw, in fine, that he would be driven, as a matter of course, to simplicity, if not deliberately induced to it as a matter of
choice. You will remember, perhaps, how desperately the Prefect laughed when I suggested, upon our first interview, that it was just possible this mystery troubled him so much on account of its being so very self-evident."

"Yes," said I, "I remember his merriment well. I really thought he would have fallen into convulsions."

"The material world," continued Dupin, "abounds with very strict analogies to the immaterial; and thus some color of truth has been given to the rhetorical dogma, that metaphor, or simile, may be made to strengthen an argument, as well as to embellish a description. The principle of the *vis inertiae*, for example, seems to be identical in physics and metaphysics. It is not more true in the former, that a large body is with more difficulty set in motion than a smaller one, and that its subsequent momentum is commensurate with this difficulty, than it is, in the latter, that intellects of the vaster capacity, while more forcible, more constant, and more eventful in their movements than those of inferior grade, are yet the less readily moved, and more embarrassed and full of hesitation in the first few steps of their progress. Again: have you ever noticed which of the street signs, over the shop-doors, are the most attractive of attention?"

"I have never given the matter a thought," I said.

"There is a game of puzzles," he resumed, "which is played upon a map. One party playing requires another to find a given word—the name of town, river, state or empire—any word, in short, upon the metope and perplexed surface of the chart. A novice in the game generally seeks to embarrass his opponents by giving them the most minutely lettered names; but the adept selects such words as stretch, in large characters, from one end of the chart to the other. These, like the over-large lettered signs and placards of the street, escape observation by dint of being excessively obvious; and here the physical oversight is precisely analogous with the moral inapprehension by which the intellect suffers to pass unnoticed those considerations which are too obtrusively and too palpably self-evident. But this is a point, it appears, somewhat above or beneath the understanding of the Prefect. He never once thought it probable, or possible, that the Minister had deposited the letter immediately beneath the nose of the whole world, by way of best preventing any portion of that world from perceiving it.

"But the more I reflected upon the daring, dashing, and discriminating ingenuity of D——; upon the fact that the document must always have been at hand, if he intended to use it to good purpose; and upon the decisive evidence, obtained by the Prefect, that it was not hidden within the limits of that dignitary's ordinary search—the more satisfied I became that, to conceal this letter, the Minister had resorted to the comprehensive and sagacious expedient of not attempting to conceal it at all.

"Full of these ideas, I prepared myself with a pair of green spectacles, and called one fine morning, quite by accident, at the Ministerial hotel. I found D—— at home, yawning, lounging, and dawdling, as usual, and pretending to be in the last extremity of ennui. He is, perhaps, the most really energetic human being now alive—but that is only when nobody sees him.

"To be even with him, I complained of my weak eyes, and lamented the necessity of the spectacles, under cover of which I cautiously and thoroughly surveyed the apartment, while seemingly intent only upon the conversation of my host.

"I paid especial attention to a large writing-table near which he sat, and upon which lay confusedly, some miscellaneous letters and other papers, with one or two musical instruments and a few books. Here, however, after a long and very deliberate scrutiny, I saw nothing to excite particular suspicion.

"At length my eyes, in going the circuit of the room, fell upon a trumpery filigree card-rack of pasteboard, that hung dangling by a dirty blue ribbon from a little brass knob just beneath the middle of the mantel-piece. In this rack, which had three or four compartments, were five or six visiting cards and a solitary letter. This last was much soiled and crumpled. It was torn nearly in two, across the middle—as if a design, in the first instance, to tear it entirely up as worthless, had been altered, or stayed, in the second. It had a large black seal, bearing the D—— cipher very conspicuously, and was addressed, in a diminutive female hand, to D——, the minister, himself. It was thrust carelessly, and even, as it seemed, contumaciously, into one of the upper divisions of the rack.
"No sooner had I glanced at this letter, than I concluded it to be that of which I was in search. To be sure, it was, to all appearance, radically different from the one of which the Prefect had read us so minute a description. Here the seal was large and black, with the D— cipher; there it was small and red, with the ducal arms of the S— family. Here, the address, to the Minister, was diminutive and feminine; there, the superscription, to a certain royal personage, was markedly bold and decided; the size alone formed a point of correspondence. But, then, the radicalness of these differences, which was excessive; the dirt; the soiled and torn condition of the paper, so inconsistent with the true methodical habits of D—, and so suggestive of a design to delude the beholder into an idea of the worthlessness of the document; these things, together with the hyperobtrusive situation of this document, full in the view of every visitor, and thus exactly in accordance with the conclusions to which I had previously arrived; these things, I say, were strongly corroborative of suspicion, in one who came with the intention to suspect.

I protracted my visit as long as possible, and, while I maintained a most animated discussion with the Minister, on a topic which I knew well had never failed to interest and excite him, I kept my attention really riveted upon the letter. In this examination, I committed to memory its external appearance and arrangement in the rack; and also fell, at length, upon a discovery which set at rest whatever trivial doubt I might have entertained. In scrutinizing the edges of the paper, I observed them to be more chafed than seemed necessary. They presented the broken appearance which is manifested when a stiff paper, having been once folded and pressed with a folder, is refolded in a reversed direction, in the same creases or edges which had formed the original fold. This discovery was sufficient. It was clear to me that the letter had been turned, as a glove, inside out, re-directed, and resealed. I bade the Minister good morning, and took my departure at once, leaving a gold snuff-box upon the table.

The next morning I called for the snuff-box, when we resumed, quite eagerly, the conversation of the preceding day. While thus engaged, however, a loud report, as if of a pistol,
whom the Prefect terms 'a certain personage,' he is reduced to opening the letter which I left for him in the card-rack."

"How? did you put any thing particular in it?"

"Why—it did not seem altogether right to leave the interior blank—that would have been insulting. D——, at Vienna once, did me an evil turn, which I told him, quite good-humoredly, that I should remember. So, as I knew he would feel some curiosity in regard to the identity of the person who had outwitted him, I thought it a pity not to give him a clue. He is well acquainted with my MS., and I just copied into the middle of the blank sheet the words—"

—— Un dessein si funeste,
S'il n'est digne d'Arrée, est digne de Thyeste.

They are to be found in Crébillon's 'Arrée.'"

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The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether

DURING the autumn of 18——, while on a tour through the extreme Southern provinces of France, my route led me within a few miles of a certain Maison de Santé, or private Mad House, about which I had heard much, in Paris, from my medical friends. As I had never visited a place of the kind, I thought the opportunity too good to be lost; and so proposed to my travelling companion, (a gentleman with whom I had made casual acquaintance a few days before,) that we should turn aside, for an hour or so, and look through the establishment. To this he objected—pleading haste, in the first place, and, in the second, a very usual horror at the sight of a lunatic. He begged me, however, not to let any mere courtesy towards himself interfere with the gratification of my curiosity; and said that he would ride on leisurely, so that I might overtake him during the day, or, at all events, during the next. As he bade me good-by, I betook myself that there might be some difficulty in obtaining access to the premises, and mentioned my fears on this point. He replied that, in fact, unless I had personal knowledge of the superintendent, Monsieur Maillard, or some credential in the way of a letter, a difficulty might be found to exist, as the regulations of these private mad-houses were more rigid than the public hospital laws. For himself, he added, he had, some years since, made the acquaintance of Maillard, and would so far assist me as to ride up to the door and introduce me; although his feelings on the subject of lunacy would not permit of his entering the house.

I thanked him, and, turning from the main-road, we entered a grass-grown by-path, which, in half an hour, nearly lost itself in a dense forest, clothing the base of a mountain. Through this dank and gloomy wood we rode some two miles, when the Maison de Santé came in view. It was a fantastic chateau, much dilapidated, and indeed scarcely tenantable through age and neglect. Its aspect inspired me with absolute dread; and, checking my horse, I half resolved to turn back. I soon, however, grew ashamed of my weakness, and proceeded.
A Descent into the Maelström | The so-called Nubian geographer—who is alluded to also in “Eleonora” and Errée—is in fact a Moroccon, Al-Idrisi (1130–1166). A Latin translation of his work was published in Paris in 1619 under the title Geographia Nubiana; hence the misnomer Nubian.

Mare Tenebrarum | Sea of Darkness, i.e., the Atlantic Ocean.

que tout ... sentiment;” | All our reasoning must in the end give way to feeling. Pascal, Pensées, VII. 4.


Defunci . . . efficiamus | Let the dead suffer no injury.

De morbis . . . bonus | Speak only good of the dead.

Paichan bomb | An explosive shell from a field artillery piece invented by and named after the French general Henri-Joseph Paichans.

Sub conservatioane . . . animae.] | In Mabbott’s translation: Under the protection of a specific form the soul is safe.

aggressi . . . exploraturi.” | In Mabbott’s translation: They were come into the sea of shades, to find that which is in it. For “Nubian geographer” and “mare tenebrarum” see notes to 43.1 and 43.14–35.


Rempis . . . plein! | Fill your empty glass / Drain your full one.

A quoi . . . bon!” | Of what use is a poet?

Presto . . . fie! | A poet is born, not made.

“Assurément . . . faible.” | Certainly not one of his weaknesses.

Impié . . . patent.] | In Mabbott’s translation: Here the wicked mob, unappeased, long cherished a hatred of innocent blood. Now that the fatherland is saved, and the cave of death demolished, where grim death has been, life and health appear.

Riots.

“*A theory . . . Landor.] | Landor was the pseudonym used by Horace Binney Wallace, the author of an anonymous novel, Stanley (1838), where the passage quoted appears.

Et binc illa iatu?] | And hence this anger?

For reasons . . . Eds.” | Poe’s interpolation.

Flaccus” | Dr. Thomas Ward, whose Pastoral was sharply criticized by Poe in Graham’s Magazine in 1843.

Un canis . . . uno.] | As a dog cannot be driven from a greasy hide. Horace, Satires, II, 5, 85.

Gauze bacteriæ | Airy gauze.

venenum toxicum | Woven air; Poe’s translation.

Ah! non guinge . . . piena.] | Correctly, “giunge.” Ah! the contentment that fills me now is beyond the scope of human thought. Bellini, La Sonambula (1841), III, 3.

Passage of the Beresina | The allusion is to the crossing of the Beresina river by Napoleon’s army during the Russian campaign of 1812.

Buchan” I burned.] | Dr. William Buchan’s Domestic Medicine was probably the most popular medical reference book of the era, printed in twenty-nine editions between 1769 and 1854.

There . . . perish.] | Poe was acquainted with William Beckford’s Oriental fantasy Vathek (1798) in which the protagonist, the Caliph Vathek, under the influence of his sorceress mother, Carathis, becomes a lost soul in the infernal labyrinth of Eblis—but here he alludes to the story indirectly, paraphrasing a passage he found in H. B. Wallace’s novel Stanley (1838). In this same source, he read of Afrasiab’s voyage down the Orus. The paragraph seems to have been important to Poe; he reprinted it separately five years later in his “Marginalia” (Southern Literary Messenger, June 1849).

Nil . . . nimio.] | There is nothing wisdom hates more than cleverness.

La Bruyère | “La Bougivre” in Tales and the Lorimer Graham copy. Correction made by Mabbott.

Y a . . . nombre.] | You can count on the fact that all popular notions and accepted conventions are stupid since the majority has found them acceptable.

Facili . . . Avesti] | The descent to Hades is easy.


Un dessein . . . Thystere.] | So deadly a scheme is worthy of Thystres, if not of Areus.

vielle cour] | Correctly, vielle cour, the old court.

Cousin . . . Brownoise] | Victor Cousin (1792–1867) was a