

SERIES 2: THE HUMBOLDT INCIDENT

PART I OF III

This section would be inserted immediately after Chapter 10 of The Poe Shadow.

Everyone who came into contact with Duponte on the deck of the *Humboldt* treated him with respect and a measure of deference – his fierceness of intelligence was visible as soon as you met him. However, rather than the admiration his demeanor struck in my own heart, the gestures of other passengers suggested an inclination to believe Duponte arrogant and supercilious.

The ladies onboard the ship from Europe to America harbored a similarly unprovoked abhorrence of Duponte, almost a jealousy. I would suggest that the female sex requires, by nature and especially by American breeding, far more attention than men. Meanwhile, Duponte, though inwardly cognizant of everything, does not exhibit the superficial courtesies thought so important by the modern world as signposts of civility.

My proximity to my traveling companion meant the unsociable attitudes were extended to me as well. There was genius among us – ignored and thought to be of less interest than the dullest man of business onboard.

It is impossible to refrain from mentioning that there was a special coldness existing between the young women on the steamer and myself. Several single women in particular became notorious for celebrating their freedom from seasickness by flirting shamelessly with the young men onboard. Perhaps this could not be prevented, within daily quarters that crammed even bachelors and married women close together. I made it quite clear that I had no intention of participating in games.

“What a tame affair you are,” said one of the men with a laugh.

In a careless action one evening, this same man, whose surname was Francis, saluted a certain married lady in the grand saloon. The private gesture was caught in the dozen mirrors that lined the saloon.

The act was whispered about on deck and in staterooms, particularly among the ladies. It was said that even the lady's husband, Mr. Bailey, had heard something about it, though he gave no outward indication of it. The embarrassed Francis held me responsible for spreading the rumor, because I had been reading a novel nearby in the saloon when his unwise act had occurred. I do not humor myself that the latent hostility that had already developed toward Duponte and myself did not play some role in his prejudice against me. I avoided him, which was easy, as he was usually occupied in playing shuffleboard on deck (or "shovel-board," as he and some of the other Europeans still called it).

One evening Francis found me alone in the ship's library, a circumstance I did not relish. I pretended to see only my reading, but backed slowly toward the wall and kept one eye always on him. You understand by now, I am not one to seek out confrontation even when it presents itself.

"Well?" he asked.

"Pardon me?"

Then, taking a definite step toward me, Francis muttered angrily, "Those damned mirrors!" He began to walk out, but before he did, he turned and sneered. "Don't believe this is over, Clark."

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Passengers lolled on deck of the *Humboldt* waiting for the ringing of the bell to break their boredom from playing games and becoming lazy with wine. Breakfast at 8, lunch at 12, dinner at 3, tea at 7, supper at 10; eating was all that was done onboard and it was always kept running in apple-pie order. It was a wonder there was no meal served in the dead of the night. At the dining table, Duponte and I were still seated by the steward in the least desirable seats, farthest away from the captain. I did not mind, as I preferred to talk in Duponte's private ear.

Duponte, for the most part, remained below deck. Sometimes he would suggest taking some air and we would walk along the quarterdeck. It happened on one of these

morning walks that the strong headwind induced both of us not to say more than a few words.

I left Duponte at the rail and wandered across deck. When I returned, I found Mr. Francis and a few other men standing with Duponte. They were vehemently gesturing at Duponte.

“See here, what is the matter over here?” I asked.

“Ah, there you are, Clark. Your *parley vous* friend, that’s what’s the matter,” said Francis.

“What of him?”

Francis continued. “First, you ignore the rest of us as though we’re not good enough. Now this.”

“Tell me what in the land you’re speaking about,” I demanded.

Francis explained that a piece of paper had been left in front of his door, and he found it upon rising that morning. It had been slipped under the door during the night. This paper was the apparent source of his consternation.

“Very well,” I replied. “What did it say?”

“That is just it! I do not know!” He said it was filled with some kind of strange cipher, symbols and secret writing. The steward then showed me the document, which was indeed written in some sort of inexplicable hieroglyphic.

“I do not understand why you should think it was Monsieur Duponte who wrote this,” I said.

“Who else aboard this ship is peculiar enough to write this?” the steward replied.

Duponte merely stood and stared out peacefully at the water.

“Well, my dear Napoleon-lover,” Francis said accusingly to my companion.

“Well, Duponte? What do you say about this?”

“I cannot remember ever having less to say on any topic, actually,” answered Duponte agreeably.

“So, you threaten me and then you’re too cowardly to speak up, are you?” said Francis.

“Now, why do you suppose these peculiar writings are a threat?” I said.

“Do *you* know what the symbols on that paper mean?” Francis asked me.

“No, I don’t,” I answered.

“And neither do I! Now I call that a threat, if nothing else.”

“This is nonsense!” I interjected. “Leave him be. Do not disturb us again, gentleman.”

“Not so quickly,” the steward said with relish, snapping away the paper as though I had tried to steal it from him. “Threatening one’s fellow passenger is a serious offense. Your friend can be locked away when we reach Baltimore, if you’re not careful.”

“Locked away!” Duponte cried, chuckling at the idea.

But in my eyes these men had just taken on a most dangerous air.

SERIES 2: THE HUMBOLDT INCIDENT

PART II OF III

This section immediately follow Series 2, Part I of the Secret Chapters.

If the steward and my petty rival had their way, the urgent task awaiting us in Baltimore could be in jeopardy.

Duponte was taken to the captain’s cabin and shown the “cipher” by the ship steward.

“Tell us what this means,” the steward insisted.

“How should he know?” I demanded impatiently.

“He is a translator by occupation, yes?” asked the captain.

“He was,” I replied.

“And you agree that he is the smartest man aboard the ship?” the steward asked.

“Absolutely.”

“Then if he did not write it, he should be able to tell us what it means. And if he does not tell us, it can mean only that *he* wrote it!”

While I listened to this twisted chain of logic from the steward, Duponte had stood, saluted and returned to the stateroom.

I should add a word or two about why the steward's fear and suspicion of Duponte and myself had lingered. The ratiocinator appears to those uninitiated observers to possess powers that are nearly divine – or demonic – divine, I say, because it is a talent wholly inaccessible for most. Many talents do not provoke similar excitement. Think of persons who, when asked to draw a man, will draft some uneven geometrical shapes; yet, these persons without power to draw do not think Mr. Millet, born in humble conditions at Greville, an agent of the devil! We think to ourselves, "I *could* paint like Millet, if I did not lack the talent." The difference between someone like Auguste Duponte and the ordinary person is quite as natural in the arena of *ratiocination*. Even the smallest child carries some kernel of capacity for *ratiocination* in the recesses of the consciousness, yet our own grasp of it is so slender we rather conclude it belongs to such phantoms as *intuition* or *coincidence* when we have discerned something we should not have. You will often hear of some happily married person who, for pure amusement and jest, says to his wife (or, if a lady, says to her husband), that he is well aware of her recent scandalous infidelity. Her face then blanches and his jest is at once known to be the truth. We think that a strange coincidence, rather than notice an act of ratiocination by the questioner. The ratiocinator comprehends and applies these abilities to an extent alien to any ordinary understanding. This is the difference.

When Duponte had described to me, that afternoon in Paris near the Jewish cemetery, his reasoning regarding my heritage, I had sat in silent turmoil. I had not been upset by his knowledge. But after the explanation had been given, I felt immediately remorseful for begging to be enlightened on that point. Immeasurably greedy at having forced him to explain.

That is why at the later episode of the discovered stowaway, I did not inquire to Duponte about his chain of reasoning. Whatever it was, it was unique and private to him. We should no sooner absurdly ask the great poet *how he wrote his verses* than ask Duponte *how he had ratiocinated*. Rather, as we settled on the great steamship *Humboldt*, in the afterglow of the stowaway's ejection, the general thoughts of excitement breeding inside me had recurred.

Yet, now Francis' petty suspicion turned nearly the whole ship against Duponte. He was ignored by the passengers and neglected by the crewmembers.

Around this time, the captain had announced that Poseidon had given us “fresh blow.” The result of this humor on Poseidon’s part was increased speed, a welcome development, but also a cause of chopping seas and constant tossing. Many passengers had been touched by sickness and nausea and confined to their curtained berths.

“I cannot endure it,” I said to Duponte in our stateroom. “Fools! Accusing you so!”

“They are correct about one thing. Nobody aboard this ship except for me could craft any *acceptable* secret writing.”

“But you did not write it, Monsieur?”

“Of course I did not,” he said. “But recall, Monsieur Clark, letters cannot write themselves, nor can symbols.”

“Worry not,” I said (although, to say the truth, he did not appear to worry). “I will prove to the entire *Humboldt* that you did not write that cipher!”

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This was my opportunity to demonstrate to Duponte that I was a worthy associate, and that his decision to involve himself with me in examining Poe’s death was a wise one.

There was aboard the ship one lady of different character from the others, a Mrs. Barrington. An attractive widow perhaps in her fortieth year, she spoke favorably about Duponte in several instances in my hearing, and was tender toward him in defiance of our shipmates. She could see his true character as easily as the others believed they saw his meanness. I believe Mrs. Barrington and myself had a true common spirit. We could see the Dupontes of the world while others saw only ghosts of their own lost potential. We were comfortable because we shared this gift in common, this gift of *sight*.

I never asked for any abilities in life. That I have them, and understand them, is only in part my own doing.

On the other hand, I frankly appreciate them – it is at the time I am engaged in them that I feel most who I am. Separate, I mean, from everyone. Most men only seek to be aware of how they resemble others and maintain that resemblance. Because of this, they cannot distinguish the commonplace from the singular – in the arts, in theater, in

letters, in the characters of their fellow man and woman. Thus do most people attempt to gain *breadth*. I never wished to see every item of fine art, every Doric column of noteworthy design or every worthy composition. This is the cataloguer's work. If I entered a museum the size of the Louvre, it was my gift that I could find the one truly distinctive artwork in each massive division – although to the rest of the onlookers it might seem more of the same. This is the worthiest skill of which I had some custody. Nor does it waver. Inconsistency is the one failing from which nature excused me completely.

Even the greatest genius on the earth requires someone to believe in him and watch him, and Auguste Duponte was no exception. Perhaps a number of us had done so for Poe in some small way before he died, had made him believe there would be another chance he would be recognized.

I sat with the widow Barrington on a bench in the main saloon and confessed my distress.

“I do not trust that Francis, Mr. Clark,” she said.

“I do not want Monsieur Duponte to think I cannot assist him in a troubled time. His confidence in me is of the utmost importance.”

“About that Mr. Bailey...” Mrs. Barrington looked around and waited for the only other man in the saloon to step outside to smoke his cigar. “About Mr. Bailey. After Mr. Francis saluted that awful Mrs. Bailey, I saw Francis in the passageway in an argument with Mr. Bailey.”

“Bailey must have heard Francis had been meddling with his wife, and reprimanded him.”

“That is what I would have thought. Except it seemed Mr. Francis was doing most of the talking, and Mr. Bailey only standing there dumbly,” she said.

“That is odd. What should Francis wish to say to Bailey? I should think he would have avoided him with all of his energies.”

“Another thing,” she said, looking around again. “I have not showed anybody else this, Mr. Clark.”

She removed a small square of paper on which the ink was smudged. The stationary it had come from had been of a thick, heavy quality. There were only a few words legible in it, which I read with interest.

“Did you find this near Francis’s stateroom?” I asked eagerly.

“No. Up on deck.”

Later that day, I circled around the staterooms and silently peered behind each curtain. Satisfying myself, the next morning I approached the steward after breakfast and requested leave to see the cipher once again.

The steward hesitated. “I do know what you think *you* can see in it, anyway.”

“I can do much that is unexpected, as you recall,” I said, hinting at the stowaway that the steward had believed I had uncovered at the beginning of our passage.

The steward relented, taking me to the captain’s quarters where he handed me the paper.

“Well?” he asked.

I did not reply.

“I did not think so. What could a man like you make out of it?”

“Yes, you were quite right,” I said, hiding my excitement, “I cannot make *anything* of it.”

SERIES 2: THE HUMBOLDT INCIDENT

PART III OF III

This section immediately follow Series 2, Part II of the Secret Chapters.

Later I was walking on deck to find Duponte when Francis signaled me. He looked haggard and anxious.

“I hear you’ve examined that cryptograph again, Clark. Do you know what it means? Do you?”

“Excuse me, Francis,” I said.

He blocked my way. “Don’t be stuffy. It’s been plaguing me not to know. I simply want to know what it means! Tell me.”

“Mr. Francis, I insist you move out of my way.”

He blocked my path again. Each time I took a step he stood in my way. A crowd of passengers began to gather. I decided to use this to my advantage to promote my new plan. Meanwhile, Duponte was sitting with an indifferent air in a chair on deck.

“What’s happening here?” the steward asked.

“This man knows what that cryptograph says and refuses to tell me!” Francis cried, pointing at me.

“He is right,” I said loudly. “I do know.”

“What?” Francis gasped.

I now had everyone’s chained attention. There was no noise aboard the *Humboldt* other than the wind and sea.

“The man who wrote this, indeed, is among us right now,” I said.

“Who is it? Who?” Francis asked excitedly, grabbing my arm. “Tell me who!”

“You,” I replied quietly.

“Me?” Francis laughed. “Why, you are as much an odd fish as your friend.”

“I will explain. Let us go back several weeks. After Mr. Francis made an improper salute to Mrs. Bailey, he saw fit to blame me for spreading gossip about it. It appeared I was the only person who could have told the rest of the ship. That is, except for Francis himself.”

“What do you mean?” Francis asked.

“Mrs. Bailey, who enjoys flirting and does not look for any reason to stop, had no reason to inform others of what you’d done. I had no reason or desire. But *you* did.”

“Careful what you say there!” declared Francis.

“You are the one that should be more careful, Francis,” I replied. “You were seen in a heated discussion a day later with Mr. Bailey. Would you tell us what you were speaking of?”

“Why, he was reprimanding me for addressing his wife,” Francis replied boastfully. “Can you blame him? I suppose I should ignore the pretty women of the ship, as you do, Mr. Clark.”

“I do not think so, Francis. You see, you were the one doing the talking to Bailey. I believe you were threatening him that if he did not satisfy you, you would sully his wife’s good name to his society back in America.”

“Absurd!” Francis cried.

“Is it? Bailey would not play the game, and you decided to make your threat clearer. You wanted to extort Bailey. But since he had already ignored you, you wished Bailey to believe that another man aboard the ship was doing the blackmailing.”

“I shall not hear another word of this! Unless you have proof for your allegations, I suggest you stay silent!” Francis cried.

“Proof. Very well. Steward, will you kindly go to Mr. A_____’s stateroom and bring in the writing materials you find on his front stand.”

Francis protested the idea. “Mr. A_____? I don’t even know the bloke.”

But the steward was intrigued enough to enter the saloon and walk to A_____’s stateroom. He and another crewmember returned holding enough objects to fill a stationary warehouse, which they placed on the deck. There were blank books, account book, ink, portfolios, and a silver pencil case.

“I also found this,” said the steward. He placed down another object, which looked like a strange, thick notebook, which I was pleased to see. “There may be more, but Mr. A_____ was in his bed, and I did not want to further disturb him.”

“This is all we need,” I said, smiling. “Mr. A_____, as we all know, has been seasick almost since the first day of passage. Mr. Francis knew this too, and determined that A_____ would make a perfect dupe if he could write a note to Mr. Bailey on A_____’s stationary. Francis waited until nightfall and easily entered A_____’s stateroom. As A_____ slept and tossed on his bed, Francis took Mr. A_____’s a blank notebook of paper. Mr. A_____ is a merchant.”

“What does this demonstrate, Clark?” the steward protested.

“That object you’ve brought out, which appears to be a large notebook. I am familiar with this device in my own work an attorney, and saw it in A_____’s stateroom last evening. It is called a *Manifold Letter Writer*. It allows you to instantaneously make a copy of what you are writing. See how it works? It is desirable for the traveler, because it does not require a pen or ink. Instead, the device uses a special stylus, which, when

applied to the top paper, presses down on the ‘carbonated’ paper below it and makes a copy.”

Francis squinted dumbly at the Letter Writer.

“I can only imagine our friend Mr. Francis, as a man of leisure and not business, did not know how this worked. Indeed, rather than using the stylus, he reached for a *standard* pen. In doing so, the top page was written on as he expected, but it was also partially copied on the page below. Observe.”

I picked up a standard pen and found an inkwell. I wrote the first sentence from Poe’s tale “The Purloined Letter” on the page and then removed it. I held up the carbonated page that had been below it. It looked like a meaningless scrawl of symbols, like the one Francis had found at his door.

“You see? Mr. Francis misused the Letter Writer. Here is what I believe. Francis quietly takes the Letter Writer from Mr. A_____’s room and brings it back to his stateroom. There, he composes his note of extortion and removes it from the Letter Writer. However, he did not know he had made a partial copy on the carbonated paper, which fell to the floor in his room. Francis then delivers his note to the Baileys’ stateroom, slips the Letter Writer back in A_____’s chambers, and returns to his own stateroom. In the morning, when the sun is up again and his room is filled with light, he now notices the carbonated paper near his door, and assumes it has been slipped under there during the night.”

“Do you expect anyone to believe this balderdash?” Francis laughed.

“Steward, if you please, will you hand me the cipher Francis found at his door? Thank you. Now, after Mr. Bailey received the letter, it seems he tore it to pieces, perhaps throwing it overboard. Except, on a windy or stormy day, it is difficult to throw paper. This scrap was found on deck.” I presented the small square of paper Mrs. Barrington had given to me. The fragment read “*I will expose her true nature unless you.*” I placed this over the carbonated paper found in Francis’s room. What appeared to be a string of symbols on the carbonated paper aligned precisely with the writing on this scrap. It was not any cipher, it was merely a poor copy.

“It’s the very same writing!” the steward cried.

“You see, Mr. Francis. You were the one who wrote this ‘cipher,’ though you didn’t know it, in your scheme to extort Mr. Bailey. I expect you to apologize directly to my friend, Duponte for your false accusations.”

The passengers whispered and talked amongst themselves while glaring at Francis.

“A confidence man!” “A fraud!”

I excitedly approached Duponte, who was watching the scene. Oddly, he seemed to find no enjoyment in it.

“I suppose you heard?” I asked.

“Indeed.”

“It was something you had said that permitted me to understand, Monsieur Duponte. You said that letters could not write themselves. It made me think of the one time letters *do* write themselves, with these manifold letter writers, and I looked into each stateroom until I noticed one. Well, are you not very satisfied by this? We have vanquished that man’s foolish claims!”

“Yes, but to what end?” Duponte asked musingly.

“What end? Monsieur Duponte! The truth is out!” I said with exasperation.

“Yes, I see,” Duponte said quietly. “But you must ask, at all turns, Monsieur Clark, whether the truth is worth the cost.”

“Cost? I do not understand what you mean.”

A few moments later, I felt a sense of sudden danger and turned to see Francis swinging a shuffleboard cue toward me. The first try missed, but the surprise of it made me lose my balance, leaving me vulnerable to another assault. Francis swung again, this time at my legs. The steward grabbed the cue before it could injure me.

The steward pulled the stick out of Francis’s hand and restrained him until he stopped struggling. “You’re coming with me, Mr. Francis! For extortion and now assault, sir, the captain has just ordered you confined until we reach America!”

I turned to see Duponte’s reaction to this last turn of events, but he had returned his attention to a book as though he had already forgotten all that had happened in the incident on the *Humboldt*.