

The Stolen Letter: A Lawyer's Story

by Wilkie Collins

I SERVED my time—never mind in whose office;—and started in business for myself in one of our English country towns—I decline stating which. I hadn't a quarter of the capital I ought to have had to begin with; and my friends in the neighborhood were poor and useless enough, with one exception. That exception was Mr. Frank Gatliffe, son of Mr. Gatliffe, member for the county, the richest man and the proudest for many a mile round about our parts. You won't trace any particulars by the name of Gatliffe. I'm not bound to commit myself or anybody else by mentioning names. I have given you the first that came into my head.

Well! Mr. Frank was a staunch friend of mine, and ready to recommend me whenever he got the chance. I had given him a little timely help—for a consideration of course—in borrowing money at a fair rate of interest: in fact, I had saved him from the Jews. The money was borrowed while Mr. Frank was at college. He came back from college and stopped at home for a little while, and then there got spread about all our neighborhood, a report that he had fallen in love, as the saying is, with his young sister's governess, and that his mind was made up to marry her. You want to know her name, don't you? What do you think of Smith?

Speaking as a lawyer, I consider Report, in a general way, to be a fool and a liar. But, in this case, report turned out to be something very different. Frank told me he was really in love, and said upon his honor (an absurd expression which young chaps of his age are always using) he was determined to marry Smith the governess—the sweet, darling girl, as *he* called her; but I'm not sentimental and *I* call her Smith the governess. Frank's father, being as proud as Lucifer, said “No,” as to marrying the governess, when Frank wanted him to say “Yes.” He was a man of business, was old Gatliffe, and he took the proper business course. He sent the governess away with a first-rate character and a spanking present; and then he looked about him to find something for Mr. Frank to do. While he was looking about, Mr. Frank bolted to London after the governess, who had nobody alive belonging to her to go to but an aunt—her father's sister. The aunt refuses to let Mr. Frank in without the squire's permission. Mr. Frank writes to his father, and says he will marry the girl as soon as he is of age, or shoot himself. Up to town comes the squire, and his wife, and his daughter; and a lot of sentimentality, not in the slightest degree material to the present statement, takes place among them; and the upshot of it is, that old Gatliffe is forced into withdrawing the word No, and substituting the word Yes.

I don't believe he would ever have done it, though, but for one lucky peculiarity in the case. The governess's father was a man of good family—pretty nigh as good as Gatliffe's own. He had been in the army; had sold out; set up as a wine merchant—failed—died: ditto his wife, as to the dying part of it. No relation, in fact, left for the squire to make inquiries about but the father's sister, who had behaved, as old Gatliffe said, like a thorough-bred gentle woman, in shutting the door against Mr. Frank in the first instance. So, to cut the matter short, things were at last made up pleasant enough. The time was fixed for the wedding, and an announcement about it—Marriage in High Life and all that—put into the county paper. There was a regular biography, besides, of the governess's father, so as to stop people from talking; a great flourish about his pedigree, and a long account of his services in the army; but not a word, mind ye, of his having

turned wine merchant afterward. Oh, no—not a word about that! I knew it, though, for Mr. Frank told me. He hadn't a bit of pride about him. He introduced me to his future wife one day when I met them out walking, and asked me if I did not think he was not a lucky fellow. I don't mind admitting that I did, and that I told him so. Ah! but she was one of my sort, was that governess. Stood, to the best of my recollection, five feet four. Good lissome figure, that looked as if it had never been boxed up in a pair of strays. Eyes that made me feel as if I was under a pretty stiff cross-examination the moment she looked at me. Fine, red, fresh, kiss-and-come-again sort of lips. She has had a family of children since the time I am talking of; and her cheeks are a trifle fatter, and her complexion is a shade or two redder now, than when I first met her out walking with Mr. Frank.

The marriage was to take place on a Wednesday. I decline mentioning the year or the month. I had started as an attorney on my own account—say six weeks, more or less, and was sitting, in my office on the Monday morning before the wedding day, trying to see my way clear before me, and not succeeding particularly well, when Mr. Frank suddenly bursts in as white as any ghost that ever was painted, and says he's got the most dreadful case for me to advise on, and not an hour to lose in acting on my advice.

“Is this in the way of business, Mr. Frank?” says I, stopping him just as he was beginning to get sentimental. “Yes or no, Mr. Frank?” rapping my new office paper-knife on the table to pull him up short all the sooner.

“My dear fellow”—he was always very familiar with me—“it's in the way of business, certainly; but friendship—”

I was obliged to pull him up short again, and regularly examine him as if he had been in the witness-box, or he would have kept me talking to no purpose half the day.

“Now, Mr. Frank,” said I, “I can't have any sentimentality mixed up with business matters. You please to stop talking, and let me ask you questions. Answer in the fewest words you can use. Nod when nodding will do instead of words.”

I fixed him with my eye for about three seconds, as he sat groaning and wriggling in his chair. When I'd done fixing him, I gave another rap with my paper knife on the table to startle him up a bit. Then I went on.

“From what you have been stating up to the present time,” says I, “I gather that you are in a scrape which is likely to interfere seriously with your marriage on Wednesday?” (He nodded, and I cut in again before he could say a word.) “The scrape affects the young lady you are about to marry, and goes back to the period of a certain transaction in which her late father was engaged some years ago?” (He nods and I cut in once more.) “There is a party who turned up after seeing the announcement of your marriage in the paper, who is cognizant of what he oughtn't to know, and who is prepared to use his knowledge of the same to the prejudice of the young lady and your marriage, unless he receives a sum of money to quiet him? Very well. Now, first of all, Mr. Frank, state what you have been told by the young lady herself about the transaction of her late father. How did you first come to have any knowledge of it?”

“She was talking to me about her father one day, so tenderly and prettily, that she quite excited my interest about him,” begins Mr. Frank; “and I asked her, among other things, what had occasioned his death. She said she believed it was distress of mind, in the first instance; and added, that this distress was connected with a shocking secret, which she and her mother had kept from everybody; but which she could not keep from me, because she was determined to begin her married life by having no secrets from her husband.” Here Mr. Frank began to get sentimental again, and I pulled him up short once more with the paper knife.

“She told me,” Mr. Frank went on, “that the great mistake of her father's life was his selling out of the army and taking to the wine trade. He had no talent for business; things went wrong with him from the first. His clerk, it was strongly suspected, cheated him—”

“Stop a bit,” says I, “What was that suspected clerk's name?”

“Davager,” says he.

“Davager,” says I, making a note of it. “Go on Mr. Frank.”

“His affairs got more and more entangled,” says Mr. Frank; “he was pressed for money in all directions; bankruptcy, and consequent dishonor (as he considered it) stared him in the face. His mind was so affected by his troubles that both his wife and daughter, toward the last, considered him to be hardly responsible for his own acts. In this state of desperation and misery, he—” Here Mr. Frank began to hesitate.

We have two ways in the law, of drawing evidence off nice and clear from an unwilling client or witness. We give him a fright, or we treat him to a joke. I treated Mr. Frank to a joke.

“Ah!” says I, “I know what he did. He had a signature to write; and, by the most natural mistake in the world, he wrote another gentleman's name instead of his own—eh?”

“It was a bill,” says Mr. Frank, looking very crestfallen, instead of taking the joke. “His principal creditor wouldn't wait till he could raise the money, or the greater part of it. But he was resolved, if he sold off everything, to get the amount and repay—”

“Of course!” says I. “Drop that. The forgery was discovered. When?”

“Before even the first attempt was made to negotiate the bill. He had done the whole thing in the most absurdly and innocently wrong way. The person whose name he had used was a stanch friend of his, and a relation of his wife's; a good man as well as a rich one. He had influence with the chief creditor, and he used it nobly. He had a real affection for the unfortunate man's wife, and he proved in generously.”

“Come to the point,” says I. “What did he do? In a business way, what did he do?”

“He put the false bill into the fire, drew a bill of his own to replace it, and then—only then—told my dear girl and her mother all that had happened. Can you imagine anything nobler?” asks Mr. Frank.

“Speaking in my professional capacity, I can’t imagine anything greener,” says I. “Where was the father? Off I suppose?”

“Ill in bed,” said Mr. Frank, coloring. “But he mustered strength enough to write a contrite and grateful letter the same day, promising to prove himself worthy of the noble moderation and forgiveness extended to him, by selling off everything he possessed to repay his money debt. He did sell off everything, down to some old family pictures that were heirlooms; down to the little plate he had; down to the very tables and chairs that furnished his drawing room. Every farthing of the debt was paid; and he was left to begin the world again, with the kindest promises of help from the generous man who had forgiven him. It was too late. His crime of one rash moment—atoned for though it had been—preyed upon his mind. He became possessed with the idea that he had lowered himself forever in the estimation of his wife and daughter, and—”

“He died,” I cut in. “Yes, yes, we know that. Let’s go back for a minute to the contrite and grateful letter that he wrote. My experience in the law, Mr. Frank, has convinced me that if everybody burnt everybody else’s letters, half the Courts of Justice in this country might shut up shop. Do you happen to know whether the letter we are now speaking of contained anything like an avowal or confession of the forgery?”

“Of course it did,” says he. “Could the writer express his contrition properly without making some such confession?”

“Quite easy, if he had been a lawyer,” says I. “But never mind that; I’m going to make a guess—a desperate guess, mind. Should I be altogether in error,” says I, “if I thought that this letter had been stolen; and that the fingers of Mr. Davager, of suspicious commercial celebrity, might possibly be the fingers which took it?” says I.

“That is exactly what I tried to make you understand,” cried Mr. Frank.

“How did he communicate that interesting fact to you?”

“He has not ventured into my presence. The scoundrel actually had the audacity—”

“Aha!” says I. “The young lady herself! Sharp practitioner, Mr. Davager.”

“Early this morning, when she was walking alone in the shrubbery,” Mr. Frank goes on, “he had the assurance to approach her, and to say that he had been watching his opportunity of getting a private interview for days past. He then showed her—actually showed her—her unfortunate father’s letter; put into hand another letter directed to me; bowed, and walked off, leaving her half dead with astonishment and terror.”

“It was much better for you that you were not there,” says I. “Have you got that other letter?”

He handed it to me. It was so extremely humorous and short, that I remember every word of it at this distance of time. It began in this way:

“To FRANCIS GATLIFFE, Jun., Esq.,—Sir: I have an extremely curious autograph letter to sell. The price is a five-hundred pound note. The young lady to whom you are to be married on Wednesday will inform you of the nature of the letter and the genuineness of the autograph. If you refuse to deal, I shall send a copy to the local paper, and shall wait on your highly respected father with the original curiosity, on the afternoon of Tuesday next. Having come down here on family business, I have put up at the family hotel—being to be heard of at the Gatcliffe Arms.

“Your very obedient servant,
“ALFRED DAVANGER”

“A clever fellow, that,” says I, putting the letter into my private drawer.

“Clever!” cries Mr. Frank, “he ought to be horsewhipped within an inch of his life. I would have done it myself, but she made me promise, before she told me a word of the matter, to come straight to you.”

“That was one of the wisest promises you ever made,” says I. “We can’t afford to bully this fellow, whatever else we may do with him. Don’t think that I am saying anything libelous against your excellent father’s character when I assert that if he saw the letter he would certainly insist on your marriage being put off, at the very least.”

“Feeling as my father does about my marriage, he would insist on its being dropped altogether, if he saw this letter,” says Mr. Frank, with a groan. “But even that is not the worst of it. The generous, noble girl herself says, that if the letter appears in the paper, with all the unanswerable comments this scoundrel would be sure to add to it, she would rather die than hold me to my engagement—even if my father would let me keep it.” He was a weak young fellow, and ridiculously fond of her. I brought him back to business with another rap of the paper knife.

“Hold up, Mr. Frank,” says I. “I have a question or two more. Did you think of asking the young lady whether, to the best of her knowledge, this infernal letter was the only written evidence of the forgery now in existence?”

“Yes, I did think directly of asking her that,” says he; “and she told me she was quite certain that there was no written evidence of the forgery except that one letter.”

“Will you give Davager his price for it?” says I.

“Yes,” says Mr. Frank, as quick as lightning.

“Mr. Frank,” says I, “you came here to get my help and advice in this extremely ticklish business, and you are ready, as I know, without asking, to remunerate me for all and any of my services at the usual professional rate. Now, I’ve made up my mind to act boldly—desperately, if you like—on the hit or miss—win all or lose all principle—in dealing with this matter. Here is

my proposal. I'm going to try if I can't do Mr. Davager out of his letter. If I don't succeed before tomorrow afternoon, you hand him the money, and I charge you nothing for my professional services. If I do succeed, I hand you the letter instead of Davager; and you give me the money, instead of giving it to him. It's a precious risk for me, but I'm ready to run it. You must pay your five hundred anyway. What do you say to my plan? Is it Yes—Mr. Frank—or No?"

"Hang your questions!" cries Mr. Frank, jumping up; "you know it's Yes, ten thousand times over. Only you earn the money and—"

"And you will be too glad to give it to me. Very good. Now go home. Comfort the young lady—don't let Davager so much as set his eyes upon you—keep quiet—leave everything to me—and feel as certain as you please that all the letters in the world can't stop your being married on Wednesday." With these words I hustled him off out of the office; for I wanted to be left alone to make my mind up about what I should do.

The first thing, of course, was to have a look at the enemy. I wrote to Davager, telling him that I was privately appointed to arrange the little business-matter between himself and "another party" (no names!) on friendly terms; and begging him to call on me at his earliest convenience. At the very beginning of the case, Mr. Davager bothered me. His answer was that it would not be convenient to him to call till between six and seven in the evening. In this way, you see, he contrived to make me lose several precious hours, at a time when minutes almost were of importance. I had nothing for it but to be patient, and to give certain instructions, before Mr. Davager came, to my boy Tom.

There never was such a sharp boy of fourteen before, and there never will be again, as my boy Tom. A spy to look after Mr. Davager was, of course, the first requisite in a case of this kind; and Tom was the smallest, quickest, quietest, sharpest, stealthiest little snake of a chap that ever dogged a gentleman's steps and kept cleverly out of range of a gentleman's eyes. I settled it with the boy that he was not to show at all when Mr. Davager came; and that he was to wait to hear me ring the bell, when Mr. Davager left. If I rang twice, he was to show the gentleman out. If I rang once, he was to keep out of the way, and follow the gentleman wherever he went, till he got back to the inn. Those were the only preparations I could make to begin with; being obliged to wait, and let myself be guided by what turned up.

About a quarter to seven my gentleman came. In the profession of the law we get somehow quite remarkably mixed up with the ugly people, blackguard people, and dirty people. But far away the ugliest and dirtiest blackguard I ever saw in my life was Mr. Alfred Davager. He had greasy white hair and a mottled face. He was low in the forehead, fat in the stomach, hoarse in the voice, and weak in the legs. Both of his eyes were bloodshot, and one was fixed in his head. He smelt of spirits, and carried a toothpick in his mouth. "How are you? I've just done dinner," says he; and he lights a cigar, sits down with his legs crossed and winks at me.

I tried at first to take the measure of him in a wheedling, confidential way; but it was no good. I asked him in a facetious, smiling manner, how he had got hold of the letter. He only told me in answer that he had been in the confidential employment of the writer of it, and that he had always been famous since infancy for a sharp eye to his own interests. I paid him some

compliments; but he was not to be flattered. I tried to make him lose his temper; but he kept it in spite of me. It ended in his driving me to my last resource—I made an attempt to frighten him.

“Before we say a word about the money,” I began, “let me put a case, Mr. Davager. The pull you have on Mr. Francis Gatliffe is, that you can hinder his marriage on Wednesday. Now, suppose I have got a magistrate's warrant to apprehend you in my pocket? Suppose I have a constable to execute it in the next room? Suppose I bring you up tomorrow, the day before the marriage—charge you only generally with an attempt to extort money, and apply for a day's remand to complete the case? Suppose, as a suspicious stranger, you can't get bail in this town? Suppose—”

“Stop a bit,” says Mr. Davager. “Suppose I should not be the greenest fool that ever stood in shoes? Suppose I should not carry the letter about me? Suppose I should have given a certain envelope to a certain friend of mine in a certain place in this town? Suppose the letter should be inside that envelope, directed to old Gatliffe, side by side with a copy of the letter, directed to the editor of the local paper? Suppose my friend should be instructed to open the envelope, and take the letters to their right address, if I don't appear to claim them from him this evening? In short, my dear Sir, suppose you were born yesterday, and suppose I wasn't?” says Mr. Davager, and winks at me again.

He didn't take me by surprise, for I never expected that he had the letter about him. I made a pretense of being very much taken aback, and of being quite ready to give in. we settled our business about delivering the letter and handing over the money, in no time. I was to draw out a document, which he was to sign. He knew the document was stuff and nonsense just as well as I did; and told me I was only proposing it to swell my client's bill. Sharp as he was, he was wrong there. The document was not to be drawn out to gain money from Mr. Frank, but to gain time from Mr. Davager. It served me as an excuse to put off the payment of the five hundred pounds till three o'clock on the Tuesday afternoon. The Tuesday morning Mr. Davager said he should devote to his amusement, and asked me what sights were to be seen in the neighborhood of the town. When I had told him, he pitched his toothpick into my grate—yawned—and went out.

I rang the bell once; waited till he had passed the window; and then looked after Tom. There was my jewel of a boy on the opposite side of the street, just setting his top going in the most playful manner possible. Mr. Davager walked away up the street toward the marketplace. Tom whipped his top up the street toward the marketplace too.

In a quarter of an hour he came back, with all his evidence collected in a beautifully clear and compact state. Mr. Davager had walked to a public house, just outside of town, in a lane leading to the high road. On a bench outside the public house there sat a man smoking. He said, “All right?” and gave the letter to Mr. Davager, who answered, “All right” and walked back to the inn. In the hall he ordered hot rum and water, cigars, slippers, and a fire to be lit in his room. After that, he went upstairs and Tom came away.

I now saw my road clear before me—not very far on, but still clear. I had housed the letter, in all probability for that night, at the Gatliffe Arms. After tipping Tom, I gave him directions to play about the door of the inn, and refresh himself, when he was tired, at the tart-shop opposite—eating as much as he pleased, on the understanding that he crammed all the time with his eye on

the window. If Mr. Davager went out, or Mr. Davager's friend called on him, Tom was to let me know. He was also to take a little note from me to the head chambermaid—an old friend of mine—asking her to step over to my office on a private matter of business, as soon as her work was done for that night. After settling these little matters, having half an hour to spare, I turned to and did myself a bloater at the office-fire, and a drop of gin and water, hot, and felt comparatively happy.

When the head chambermaid came, it turned out, as good luck would have it, that Mr. Davager had offended her. I no sooner mentioned him than she flew into a passion; and when I added, by way of clinching the matter, that I was retained to defend the interests of a very beautiful and deserving young lady (name not referred to, of course) against the most cruel and underhanded treachery on the part of Mr. Davager, the head chambermaid was ready to go to any lengths that she could safely to serve my cause. In few words, I discovered that Boots was to call Mr. Davager at eight the next morning and was to take his clothes downstairs to brush as usual. If Mr. D. had not emptied his own pockets overnight, we arranged that Boots was to forget to empty them for him, and was to bring the clothes downstairs just as he found them. If Mr. D.'s pockets were emptied, then of course, it would be necessary to transfer the searching process to Mr. D.'s room. Under any circumstances, I was certain of the head chambermaid; and under any circumstances also, the head chambermaid was certain of Boots.

I waited till Tom came home, looking very puffy and bilious about the face; but as to his intellects, if anything, rather sharper than ever. His report was uncommonly short and pleasant. The inn was shutting up: Mr. Davager was going to bed in rather a drunken condition; Mr. Davager's friend had never appeared. I sent Tom (properly instructed about keeping our man in view all the next morning) to his shakedown behind the office desk where I heard him hiccupping half the night, as boys will, when over excited and too full of tarts.

At half-past seven next morning, I slipped quietly into Boots's pantry. Down came the clothes. No pockets in trouser. Waistcoat pockets empty. Coat pockets with something in them. First, handkerchief; secondly, bunch of keys; thirdly, cigar-case; fourthly, pocketbook. Of course I wasn't such a fool as to expect to find the letter there, but I opened the pocket book with a certain curiosity, notwithstanding.

Nothing in the two pockets of the book but some old advertisements cut out of newspapers, a lock of hair tied round with a dirty bit of ribbon, a circular letter about a loan society, and some copies of verses not likely to suit any company that was not of an extremely wicked description. On the leaves of the pocketbook, people's addresses scrawled in pencil, and bets jotted down in red ink. On one leaf; by itself; this queer inscription: "MEM. 5 ALONG. 4 ACROSS." I understood everything but those words and figures; so of course I copied them into my own book. Then I waited in the pantry till Boots had brushed the clothes and had taken them upstairs. His report, when he came down was, that Mr. D. had asked if it was a fine morning. Being told that it was, he had ordered breakfast at nine, and a saddle horse to be at the door at ten, to take him to Grimwith Abbey—one of the sights in our neighborhood which I had told him of the evening before.

“I’ll be here, coming in by the back way, at half past ten,” says I to the head chambermaid. “To take the responsibility of making Mr. Davager’s bed off your hands for this morning only. I want to hire Sam for the morning. Put it down in the order book that he’s to be brought round to my office at ten.”

Sam was a pony, and I’d made up my mind that it would be beneficial to Tom’s health, after the tarts, if he took a constitutional airing on a nice hard saddle in the direction of Grimwith Abbey.

“Anything else?” says the head chambermaid.

“Only one more favor,” says I. “Would my boy Tom be very much in the way if he came, from now till ten, to help with the boots and shoes, and stood at his work close by this window which looks out on the staircase?”

“Not a bit,” says the head chambermaid.

“Thank you,” says I; and stepped back to my office directly.

When I had sent Tom off to help with the boots and shoes, I reviewed the whole case exactly as it stood at that time. There were three things that Mr. Davager might do with the letter. He might give it to his friend again before ten—in which case, Tom would mostly likely see the said friend on the stairs. He might take it to his friend, or some other friend, after ten—in which case, Tom was ready to follow him on Sam the pony. And, lastly, he might leave it hidden somewhere in his room at the inn—in which case, I was ready for him with a search warrant of my own granting, under favor always of my friend the head chambermaid. So far I had all my business arrangements all gathered up nice and compact in my own hands. Only two things bothered me: the terrible shortness of time at my disposal, in case I failed in my first experiments for getting hold of the letter, and that queer inscription which I had copied out of the pocketbook.

“MEM. 5 ALONG. 4 ACROSS.” It was the measurement, most likely, of something, and he was afraid of forgetting it; therefore it was something important. Query—something about himself? Say “5” (inches) “along”—he doesn’t wear a wig. Say “5” (feet) “along”—it can’t be coat, waistcoat, trousers, or underclothing. Say “5” (yards) “along”—it can’t be anything about himself, unless he wears round his body the rope that he’s sure to be hanged with one of these days. Then it is *not* something about himself. What do I know of that is important to him besides? I know of nothing but the letter. Can the memorandum be connected with that? Say, yes. What do “5 along” and “4 across” mean, then? The measurement of something he carries about with him?—or the measurement of something in his room? I could get pretty satisfactorily to myself as far as that; but I could go no further.

Tom came back to the office, and reported him mounted for his ride. His friend had never appeared. I sent the boy off, with his proper instructions, on Sam’s back—wrote an encouraging letter to Mr. Frank to keep him quiet—then slipped into the inn by the back way a little before half past ten. The head chambermaid gave me a signal when the landing was clear. I got into his room without a soul but her seeing me, and locked the door immediately. The case was, to a certain extent, simplified now. Either Mr. Davager had ridden out with the letter about him, or he

had left it in some safe hiding place in his room. I suspected it to be in his room, for a reason that will a little astonish you—his trunk, his dressing case, and all the drawers and cupboards were left open. I knew my customer, and I thought this extraordinary carelessness on his part rather suspicious.

Mr. Davager had taken one of the best bedrooms at the Gatcliffe Arms. Floor carpeted all over, walls beautifully papered, four-poster, and general furniture first-rate. I searched, to begin with, on the usual plan, examining everything in every possible way, and taking more than an hour about it. No discovery. Then I pulled out a carpenter's rule which I had brought with me. Was there anything in the room which—either in inches, feet, or yards—answered to “5 along” and “4 across?” Nothing. I put the rule back in my pocket—measurement was no good, evidently. Was there anything in the room that would count up to 5 one way and 4 another, seeing that nothing would measure up to it? I had got obstinately persuaded by this time that the letter must be in the room—principally because of the trouble I had had in looking after it. And persuading myself of that, I took it into my head next, just as obstinately, that “5 along” and “4 across” must be the right clew to find the letter by—principally because I hadn't left myself, after all my searching and thinking, even so much as the vestige of another guide to go by. “5 along”—where could I count five along, in any part of it?

Not on the paper. The pattern there was pillars of trelliswork and flowers, inclosing a plain green ground—only four pillars along the wall and only two across. The furniture? There were not five chairs, or five separate pieces of any furniture in the room altogether. The fringes that hung from the cornice of the bed? Plenty of them, at any rate! Up I jumped on the counterpane, with my penknife in my hand. Every way that “5 along” and “4 across” could be reckoned on those unlucky fringes, I reckoned on them—probed with my penknife—scratched with my nails—crunched with my fingers. No use; not a sign of a letter; and the time was getting on—oh, Lord! how the time did get on in Mr. Davager's room that morning.

I jumped down from the bed, so desperate at my ill-luck that I hardly cared whether anybody heard me or not. Quite a little cloud of dust rose at my feet as they thumped on the carpet. “Hallo!” thought I; “my friend the head chambermaid takes it easy here. Nice state for a carpet to be in, in one of the best bedrooms at the Gatcliffe Arms.” Carpet! I had been jumping up on the bed, and staring up at the walls, but I had never so much as given a glance down at the carpet. Think of me pretending to be a lawyer, and not knowing how to look low enough.

The carpet! It had been a stout article in its time; had evidently begun in a drawing room, then descended to a coffee-room, then gone upstairs altogether to a bedroom. The ground was brown, and the pattern was bunches of leaves and roses speckled over the ground at regular distances. I reckoned up the bunches. Ten along the room—eight across it. When I had stepped out five one way and four the other, and was down on my knees on the center bunch, as true as I sit on this bench, I could hear my own heart beating so loud that it quite frightened me.

I looked narrowly all over the bunch, and I felt all over it with the ends of my fingers; and nothing came of that. Then I scraped it over slowly and gently with my nails. My second fingernail stuck a little at one place. I parted the pile of the carpet over that place, and saw a thin slit, which had been hidden by the pile being smoothed over it—a slit about half an inch long,

with a little end of brown thread, exactly the color of the carpet ground, sticking out about a quarter of an inch from the middle of it. Just as I laid hold of the thread gently, I heard a footstep outside the door.

It was only the head chambermaid. "Haven't you done yet?" she whispers.

"Give me two minutes," says I, "and don't let anybody come near the door—whatever you do, don't let anybody startle me again by coming near the door."

I took a little pull at the thread, and heard something rustle. I took another pull, and out came a piece of paper, rolled up tight like those candle-lighters that the ladies make. I unrolled it—and, by George! there was the letter!

The original letter!—I knew it by the color of the ink. The letter that was worth five hundred pounds to me! It was all I could do to keep myself at first from throwing my hat into the air and hooraying like mad. I had to take a chair and sit quiet in it for a minute or two, before I could cool myself down to my proper business level. I knew that I was safely down again when I found myself pondering how to let Mr. Davager know that he had been done by the innocent county attorney after all.

It was not long before a nice little irritating plan occurred to me. I tore a blank leaf out of my pocketbook, wrote on it with my pencil, "Change for a five hundred pound note," folded up the paper, tied the thread to it, poked it back into the hiding place, smoothed over the pile of the carpet, and, as every reader guesses before I can tell them, bolted off to Mr. Frank. He, in his turn, bolted off to show the letter to the young lady, who first certified to its genuineness, then dropped it into the fire, and then took the initiative for the first time since their marriage engagement, by flinging her arms round his neck, kissing him with all her might, and going into hysterics in his arms. So, at least Mr. Frank told me; but that's not evidence. It is evidence, however, that I saw them married with my own eyes on the Wednesday; and that while they went off in a carriage and four to spend the honeymoon, I went off on my own legs to open a credit at the Town and County Bank with a five hundred pound note in my pocket.

As to Mr. Davager, I can tell you nothing more about him, except what is derived from hearsay evidence, which is always unsatisfactory evidence, even in a lawyer's mouth.

My boy Tom, although twice kicked off by Sam the pony, never lost hold of the bridle, and kept his man in sight from first to last. He had nothing particular to report, except that on the way out to the Abbey, Mr. Davager had stopped at the public house, had spoken a word or two to his friend of the night before, and had handed him what looked like a bit of paper. This was no doubt the clew to the thread that held the letter, to be used in case of accidents. In every other respect Mr. D. had ridden out and ridden in like an ordinary sightseer. Tom reported him to me as having dismounted at the hotel about two. At half past I locked my office door, nailed a card under the knocker, with "not at home till tomorrow" written on it, and retired to a friend's house, a mile or so out of town, for the rest of the day.

Mr. Davager left the Gatliffe Arms that night with his best clothes on his back, and with all the valuable contents of his dressing case in his pockets. I am not in a condition to state whether he ever went through the form of asking for his bill or not; but I can positively testify that he never paid it, and that the effects left in his bedroom did not pay it either.

Harper's New Monthly Magazine, February 1855

Harper's attributed this story to Charles Dickens; however, the real author is Wilkie Collins and the original title is "The Fourth Poor Traveller." It was published in "The Seven Poor Travellers," the Extra Christmas Number of *Household Words* for December 1854.

A shortened version was also included as "The Stolen Letter: A Lawyer's Story" in Thomas Water's *Diary of a Detective Police Officer* in 1864, with the prefatory parenthetical "[The following story related to me by a lawyer, although not coming directly within the sphere of my operations as a Detective, I think entitled to a place in these "Recollections," for the curious phase of criminal life which it presents. I give it in the lawyer's own words.]"