



Patrick Ferrer

Patrick Ferrer is a French author of hardboiled fiction and spy thrillers. His first novel, *Le baiser de Pandore* (*Pandora's Kiss*), was an instant bestseller and was selected as one of the best self-published works of fiction of 2015, before being acquired by a French publishing house. Patrick has since published two other novels and countless short stories, a genre he especially enjoys.

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A story inspired by



The Hidden Letter

by Patrick Ferrer

A story written for
Hôtel de la Cité

The Hidden Letter

The moment he entered the bar,

I knew that Mister J. wasn't your usual guest. Maybe it was the way his eyes darted around, taking the measure of everything he saw, or that half smile as he twirled his moustache with an air of knowing something you didn't. Most people stop as they enter the hotel, awed by the scenery, but Mister J. clearly wasn't the type to be easily impressed.

I wasn't surprised when he came straight to the bar counter and sat on a stool, facing the room, his eyes always alert. He quickly looked at me, sizing me up I suppose, and commented on the great cocktails he had heard were the specialty of the bar. I recommended our vermouth and he nodded appreciatively. He seemed quite an amiable person despite his odd manners.

"Are you expecting royalty?" he whispered as I was preparing his drink.

Well, that wouldn't be the first time, illustrious guests having favored this hotel for over a century, but I wasn't aware of such things and, if I had been, discretion would have prevented me from revealing it.

"What makes you think so, sir?" I replied, as I placed the glass in front of him.

He let out his half smile.

"Oh! I only arrived yesterday but I sense this morning a flurry of activity, flushed cheeks among the chambermaids, whispered conversations. I'd say something is in the air. Am I mistaken?"

He wasn't. Hours earlier, the gardener had discovered a mysterious box hidden under a stone behind one of the tall cypresses of the swimming pool. I hadn't seen the box myself but it was said to be quite old, and beautifully crafted.

Mister J. twirled his moustache as I briefed him on the strange find.

"All this excitement for a box? You're not telling me everything, are you?"

I wasn't. I complimented him for his sense of observation in an effort to steer the conversation toward a less delicate subject, but he dismissed it with a wave of his hand.

"I am retired now, but when you have worked all your life for Scotland Yard, picking up clues becomes second nature. Now, about that box?"

He was a keen examiner too. I had no reason to make a mystery of it since it was obvious the box had been hidden decades ago, so I admitted that there was a letter inside it as well. A love letter. I could swear his eyes sparkled.

"Now that's interesting! And do we know from whom? Or to whom?"

That was the big question everybody was excited about. But whoever it had been, the letter was never received, nor read, or it wouldn't have been found today.

"A love letter left unread... is there anything more tragic?"

Was I so transparent or had Mister J. just read my mind? I knew him for only minutes but he seemed able to read people like a book.

"Indeed, sir. As I understood it, the letter fixed a secret rendezvous at the western gate of the citadel."

"And you think our lovers had planned to elope."

"That's a possibility. It's a short walk from there to the river, a most romantic place if you care to visit it and from there they could have taken a boat and left the city unnoticed."

"But it was never found and whomever wrote it waited in vain..."

"It would seem so. The gardener said that the letter was written in the most delicious style that brought tears to his eyes and could only be attributed to a distinguished poet or the most ardent lover."

We stood silent for an instant.

"History sometimes rests on the smallest coincidence," sighed Mister J. "And we do not have any indication about who wrote it? Wasn't it signed?"

"Only with the single letter C, sir. I do not have further information."

"Where is the letter now?"

"It was brought to the hotel manager but I do not think he would allow..."

I had not finished my sentence and Mister J. was already on his way to the reception desk. He was that kind of man. I do not know whether the manager ever showed him the letter but, in the following days, news of the retired detective echoed through the hotel as he was seen exploring every inch of the property.

The gardener saw him strolling along the swimming pool in the majestic shadow of the Saint-Nazaire Basilica. One chambermaid reported him musing on one of the balconies overlooking the medieval citadel. He spent hours combing through the hundred year old visitors' book, attempting, I suppose, to find a match between the mysterious C and one of our honored guests. From Hollywood stars to world-renowned artists, rulers, dignitaries and royalty, the list is long. He was seen detailing for hours the many gardens and architectural wonders of the hotel, contemplating thoughtfully its sumptuous frescoes and paintings, pondering over the breathtaking scenery offered by its gothic windows overlooking the city.

He was even seen ambling under the cool shade of ancestral trees while the river whispered at his feet, following the path that the lovers may have taken in their flight, had the letter ever been received.

Finally, on the last day of his stay, Mister J. came by the bar to enjoy a final vermouth. He seemed quite relaxed and happy. Even his half smile had evolved into something more serene. Needless to say, I was curious to hear whether he had unveiled the secret of the hidden letter, and only a natural sense of discretion

prevented me from asking him forthwith. But, as usual, he seemed able to read my mind.

"I wanted to thank you. Oh! No, not for the cocktails, which are admirable by the way, but for putting me on the tracks of that hidden letter."

"Did you find out...?"

He smiled.

"I think so. And it wasn't at all what I was expecting."

I couldn't say if the gleam in his eyes was one of satisfaction or if he was simply toying with me, the way he would have toyed with his suspects before showing his hand.

"In fact," he added, "it was there, right before the eye. It had been all along."

I couldn't quite figure out where he was leading, so I waited patiently for him to elaborate.

"It has taken me some time to understand it but, you see, whoever wrote it and whatever happened that night is of no great importance. It's the letter that matters."

"The letter?"

"Yes. I thought at first that it had been hidden, but I was wrong. It has always remained in full sight, for all to see. But sometimes we forget to look."

I must have looked bemused because he leaned over to whisper in my ear.

"Think. The poetry of its contents, the ancient secrets into which it offers a glimpse, the call to leave the world behind to escape into a romantic and exciting adventure, the beauty of feelings and the weight of history. Doesn't that remind you of something?"

I couldn't think of anything, so he smiled and turned towards the room.

"This place... its spirit, its beauty, its history. One could say it's impossible to miss, but I did not fully realize it myself until I actually started to look, because of this mysterious letter, for a secret within its walls that was in front of my eyes. Authenticity is something that cannot be imitated. It's in every stone, in every piece of carved wood, in every statue, in the light and the shadows that make this unparalleled hotel. It's a thousand years of history, of passion, of art, that fill your eyes and soul wherever you look. The hidden letter was the key to this place, the call to escape from the mundane world and discover the wonders that were awaiting me here. I guess everyone comes here to look for that key, and they all discover it in their own way."

And with these words, he stood up and said goodbye. I watched him leaving the bar, thinking that I had been wrong and that Mister J. wasn't an unusual guest after all.

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