



ANTOINE LAURAIN

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *The President's Hat*

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is an excellent
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Le Figaro

The Red Notebook



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The Red Notebook

Antoine Laurain

Translated from the French by Emily Boyce & Jane Aitken

Bookseller Laurent Letellier comes across an abandoned handbag on a Parisian Street, and feels impelled to return it to its owner.

The bag contains no money, phone or contact information. But a small red notebook with handwritten thoughts and jottings reveals a person that Laurent would very much like to meet.

Without even a name to go on, and only a few of her possessions to help him, how is he to find one woman in a city of millions?

ISBN print: 9781908313867

e-book: 9781908313874

£8.99/\$14.95







An extract from *The Red Notebook*

There is little but the sublime to help us through the banality of life.

Alain Fournier







The taxi dropped her off at the corner of the boulevard. She was only fifty metres from her flat. The road was lit by streetlamps that turned the fronts of the buildings orange, but even so she was anxious, as she always was when she came home late at night. She glanced back but there was no one in sight. The light from the three-star hotel opposite flooded the pavement between the two potted trees flanking its entrance. She stopped outside her door, unzipped her bag to find her keys and security fob, and after that everything happened very quickly.

A hand grabbed hold of the strap, a hand that had appeared out of nowhere and belonged to a dark-haired man wearing a leather jacket. It only took a second for fear to spread through her veins and move up to her heart where it burst into an icy rain. She instinctively clung to her bag; the man tugged harder and, as she resisted, he placed his palm against her face and pushed her head back into the metal door frame. She stumbled in shock, seeing stars that shimmered on the road like hovering fireflies, her chest tightened and she let go of the bag.

The man smiled as the strap swirled through the air and he ran for it. She stayed leaning against the door, watching the man disappear into the night. She was breathing heavily, her throat was on fire, her mouth dry – her water bottle was in the bag. She reached over and tapped in the entry code, put her weight against the door to open it and slid inside.

The glass and black-iron door put a safety barrier between her and the outside world. She sat carefully down on the marble steps of the





hallway and closed her eyes, waiting for her brain to calm down and start working properly. Just as the security signs gradually go out on aeroplanes, so the alerts – I'm being attacked, I'm going to die, my bag's been stolen, I'm not hurt, I'm alive – disappeared one by one. She looked up at the row of letterboxes and focused on the one bearing her name and floor number: 5th floor, left. Finding herself keyless at almost two o'clock in the morning, she realised she would not be going through the door of the left-hand flat on the fifth floor any time soon.

This all-too-concrete fact was taking shape in her mind: I can't go home and my bag's been stolen. I don't have it any more, I will never see it again. A part of her had been brutally torn away. She looked around as though expecting the bag to suddenly materialise, wiping out the scene that had just taken place. But it was gone. It was streets away by now, snatched, flying on the man's arm as he ran; he was going to open it and inside he would find her keys, her identity card, her memories. Her entire life.

She could feel hot tears welling in her eyes. Her hands wouldn't stop shaking from fear, despair and anger, and the pain at the back of her head suddenly got sharper. When she raised her hand to where it hurt, she realised she was bleeding, but of course her tissues were in her bag.





It was 1.58 a.m. There was no way she could knock on any of her neighbours' doors at this time of night. She couldn't even disturb the friendly man whose name she couldn't remember who worked in graphic novels and had just moved in on the second floor. The hotel seemed the only possible solution. The light in the hallway had just gone off automatically and she felt for the switch. Once she could see again, she felt mildly dizzy and had to steady herself against the wall. She needed to pull herself together and go and ask to spend the night at the hotel, explaining that she lived just across the road and would pay for the room the next day. She hoped the night porter would be sympathetic because she was struggling to think of a plan B.

She pushed open the heavy front door and a shiver ran through her. It was not the cold but a vague sense of fear, as if the buildings lining the street had soaked up something of what had happened and the man might suddenly step out from a wall as if by magic. Laure looked around. The road was empty. The man was clearly not coming back, but sometimes fear takes over, and distinguishing between the irrational and the possible is not easy at almost two o'clock in the morning.

She crossed the road heading towards the hotel. She had an urge to hug her bag close to her body but found nothing but empty space between her hip and forearm. She stepped into the light under the hotel awning and the automatic door slid open. The grey-haired man at the desk looked up as she walked in.

He agreed, slightly begrudgingly, to let her stay but when Laure





began taking off her gold bracelet to leave as security, he put his hand up in a sign of acceptance. The distraught young woman was almost certainly telling the truth, she seemed a trustworthy character and he judged the chances of her coming back to pay her bill at a good nine out of ten. She had left her name and address. The hotel staff had dealt with much more serious cases of unpaid bills than a single night's stay for a lone woman who said she had been living opposite for the past fifteen years.

It was true that phoning the friends at whose house she had spent the evening could have been a solution, but their number was in her phone. Since the advent of mobile technology and electronic phone books, the only numbers Laure knew by heart were her own and her work number. The idea of calling a locksmith as suggested by the man on reception was also impossible. Laure had used up her cheque book and had been slow to order a new one; it would not arrive at the bank until early the following week. Other than her debit card and forty euros cash, both of which were inside her wallet, she had no means of payment. It was incredible how, in situations like this, all the tiny details that had seemed totally insignificant an hour before suddenly seemed to be conspiring against you.

She followed the man into the lift, then along the corridor towards room 52, which looked onto the street. He turned the light on, briefly pointed out the bathroom and toilet and handed her the key. She thanked him, promising once again to come back and pay as soon as possible the next day. The porter gave her a friendly smile, tiring a little of hearing the same promise for the fifth time: 'I believe you, Mademoiselle. Good night.'

Laure walked over to the window and lifted the net curtains. She could see straight across to the floor on which she lived. She had left the living-room lamp on and placed a chair in front of the partly opened





window so that Belphégor could look out. It was very odd seeing her flat from here. She almost expected to glimpse herself crossing the room. She opened the hotel window.

‘Belphégor,’ she called in a whisper, ‘Belphégor ,’ making the sharp little kissing sound all cat owners can make.

A few moments later, the black shape leapt up onto the chair and two yellow eyes stared back at her in amazement. How on earth was it possible for his mistress to be across the road and not inside the flat?

‘Yep, that’s right, I’m over here,’ she told him with a shrug.

She gave him a little wave and decided to go to bed. In the bathroom, she found a box of tissues and some water to clean the wound to her head. As she leant over, she felt dizzy again. On the plus side, she seemed to have stopped bleeding. She picked up a towel and laid it over the pillow, and then got undressed. Lying down, she could not stop herself replaying the scene of the mugging. The incident, which had lasted no more than a few seconds, was now developing into a slow-motion sequence. Longer and more fluid than the stylised slow-mos in films. More like the ones in science documentaries of dummies in simulated car crashes. You see the inside of the vehicle, the windscreen blowing out like a vertical puddle of water, the dummies’ heads moving smoothly forward, the airbags inflating like bubble gum and the metal shell lightly crumpling, as if rippled by a warm breeze.



Laurent gave up. He had been attempting to shave in front of the bathroom mirror but his electric razor, whose buzzing had been the soundtrack to all his mornings, had made a tired groaning sound when he turned it on. Now even that had stopped, giving way to silence. He turned the razor off and on again, tapped the foil, and unplugged it and plugged it back in again, but the Braun 860 with its three rotating blades had given up the ghost. Laurent was irritated. He couldn't bear to throw the razor away, at least not yet. He laid it down reverentially in the clam dish brought back from Greece ten years ago.

His Gillette that he found mouldering in a drawer also turned out to be useless, because of a second setback. When he turned on the bath tap, he was greeted by a dull hiss. No water. The notice announcing that the water would be turned off had been up in the building's hallway for a week, but he'd forgotten. Laurent looked at himself in the mirror. He saw a badly shaven man with strangely dishevelled hair from his restless night. There was just enough water in the kettle for one cup of coffee.

As he left the building he glanced over at the metal shutter of the shop. Shortly he would open the shutter by turning the key in the electronic panel, then nod a greeting to his neighbour Jean Martel (of *Le Temps Perdu*, antiques – bric-a-brac – bought and sold) enjoying a café crème on the terrace of the Jean Bart. He would also wave at the lady from the dry cleaner's (*La Blanche Colombe* – Specialist Dry Cleaning) who in turn would wave back through the window. Then after he had raised





the shutter he would look over his own shop window as he always did with its 'New fiction', 'Art books', 'Bestsellers', alongside 'Books we love' and 'Must reads'. On the stroke of ten thirty, Maryse would arrive, followed by Damien. The team complete, the day could commence. They would unpack the deliveries of books and help customers with their varied requests. 'I'm looking for that novel about the Second World War. I can't remember who it's by or who published it.' And then there would be the recommendations. 'Madame Berthier, I really think you should try this. You were looking for something light to take your mind off things at the moment. I promise you, you will love it.' And the orders to put through. 'Yes, hello, Le Cahier Rouge here. Could I order three copies of *Don Juan*, Molière, the paperback edition from Biblio lycée?' And the returns: 'Yes, hello, Le Cahier Rouge here. I'd like to return four copies of *Summer Sadness*. It's not selling and I need to change my displays.' There would be events to plan: 'Yes, hello, Laurent Letellier from Le Cahier Rouge here. Would it be possible to organise a signing here with your author?'



When he had bought it, the bookshop had been a moribund café, Le Celtique, run by an elderly couple. They were waiting to sell up so that they could return to the Auvergne and Laurent was their unexpected saviour. The café had the added advantage of coming with a flat above it. At least, it was an advantage in that it eliminated travelling to work, but a disadvantage in that it meant Laurent never left his place of work.

Laurent walked round the square Le Cahier Rouge was in and went up Rue de la Pentille. He was carrying the latest novel by Frédéric Pichier, who was coming for a signing the following week. Laurent planned to reread the notes he had jotted in the book over a double espresso on the terrace of the Espérance café, where he often ended up on his morning perambulations.

The book told the story of a young farm worker during the Great War. It was the fourth book from the author who had made his name with *Tears of Sand*, the story of a Napoleonic soldier falling in love with a young Egyptian girl during the French campaign in the Middle East. Pichier was adept at setting the sufferings of his characters against the backdrop of great historical events. Laurent couldn't make up his mind whether Pichier was just a good storyteller or a real writer. There were arguments both ways. But in any case, the book was selling very well and the signing session would certainly be popular.

As he was walking along, Maryse sent him a text. Her train had been delayed and she would not be there by opening time. 'Keep me posted, Maryse,' Laurent texted back before setting off along Rue Vivant Denon.





As he reached number 6, he checked to make sure his customer, Madame Merlier, had opened her blinds. The old lady, who looked remarkably like the actress Marguerite Moreno, was an avid reader and always rose early. She had said to Laurent one day, ‘If I haven’t opened my blinds, I’ll either be dead or well on the way.’ They had agreed that Laurent would call the fire brigade if he ever saw the blinds down in daytime. But everything was fine at number 6, the blinds were open. Almost the only ones on the street in fact, since it was Saturday morning and people were enjoying a lie-in. The area was deserted. He continued on his way down Rue du Passe Musette. Café l’Espérance was right at the end, on the corner between the boulevard and the weekend market. The bins had been set out in front of each courtyard door, some accompanied by pieces of old furniture awaiting the large waste collection. Laurent passed one of the bins, slowing down – it had taken a little time to register what he had seen – then turned back and retraced his steps.

There was a handbag on top of the bin. It was lilac leather and very well looked after. It had several compartments and zipped pockets, two wide handles, a shoulder strap and gold clasps. Instinctively Laurent glanced around him – the action was absurd; no woman was suddenly going to materialise and come and claim her property. From the solid look of the bag, it was obvious it wasn’t empty. Had it been damaged and empty the owner would have thrown it into the bin, and not left it on top.

Anyway, did women throw away their handbags? Laurent thought about the woman who had shared his life for twelve years. No, Claire had never thrown away any of her bags. She had several and changed them with the seasons. She never threw away shoes either; not even when the little straps on her ballet pumps wore out – she would have them mended at the cobbler’s. In fact, even when the pumps were beyond repair, Laurent had never seen a pair in the kitchen bin amongst





the peelings. They just mysteriously disappeared. In spite of these thoughts that took him back to his past life, it was still possible that a woman might throw away her bag. But on the other hand the fact that the pristine bag was sitting on its own on top of the bin seemed to suggest something more sinister. A theft, for example.

Laurent lifted the bag. It wasn't empty. He half opened the main zip long enough to ascertain that it did indeed contain many 'personal effects' as they were called. He began to look through the bag when a young woman came out of a doorway, dragging a suitcase on wheels. She went past, then looked back at him. When her eye met Laurent's, she speeded up imperceptibly, then disappeared round the corner. At that moment, Laurent realised how shady he looked – a man on his own, ill-shaven with unkempt hair, opening a woman's handbag on top of a bin ... He shut it hastily.

What was the moral course of action now: to take it with him or to leave it where it was? Somewhere in the city, a woman had surely been robbed of her bag and in all probability had given up hope of ever seeing it again. I'm the only one who knows where it is, he thought, and if I leave it here it will be destroyed by the dustmen or stolen all over again. Laurent reached a decision: he picked it up and went off up the street. The police station was only ten minutes away. He would drop it off there, fill in a form or two, then come back and settle down in the café.

