



Proto-Spam: Spanish Prisoners and Confidence Games

Robert Whitaker

Dearest Readers, I beseech you,

Please accept this humble letter from a poor stranger seeking your help. Although we are not acquainted, I have heard word of your excellent taste in historical writing from a consumer analytic program that knows you quite well. I write to you in the most desperate of circumstances to ask you to help secure my freedom. I sit now in a cell within a modernist dungeon known as a 'library,' imprisoned after failing to heed common sense and attending graduate school in the humanities. The machinations of my enemies have forestalled correspondence with my next of kin, but the editors of *The Appendix* have kindly agreed to forward this letter to you. My imprisonment prevents the publication of my historical monograph, which would surely collect no less than \$100,000,000,000 on the open market. I offer a portion of this sum to you in return for a small advance on your part. I will discuss the specifics of my request at the end of this letter, but please begin by considering the following sample of my final work.

My writing concerns the history of advance fee fraud, better known as the “Spanish Prisoner Scheme.” In this confidence trick, the criminal contacts the victim offering a large sum of money, or other comparable treasure, in return for a small advance of funds that the criminal—posing as a distressed yet reputable person—cannot provide because of some impediment (usually imprisonment or illness). Readers with an email account have undoubtedly encountered a variation of this scheme. The proliferation of the Nigerian Letter or 419 scam during the late twentieth century encouraged the development of spam filters. While early iterations of this electronic grift were accompanied by preposterous stories involving Nigerian royalty, recent versions have made the scheme more credible by hacking the email accounts of the law-abiding and using their lives as the basis for letters sent to individuals on their contact list.

*A comment troll is someone that leaves purposefully insulting comments on Internet articles or forums to illicit a strong emotional response from other commenters. Think of them as the prank callers of the Internet age. Twitter bots are twitter accounts operated by computer programs designed to inflate the number of followers for a particular account, usually the account of a corporation or celebrity. The profile pictures for twitter bots are often taken from online advertisements, without the knowledge of the photographer or the person that was photographed. Twitter bots avoid deletion by occasionally tweeting gibberish and following accounts other than the account that they are designed to inflate. A catfish is someone that creates a fake social media profile using an attractive picture and biographical information in order to engage in a relationship, usually romantic, with a real person. The term comes from the 2010 documentary of the same name, *Catfish*.

‡Last year, Manti Te’o, a linebacker for the University of Notre Dame, rose to national prominence for his play on the field as well as his personal story of loss. In September 2012, Te’o told *Sports Illustrated* in an interview that his grandmother and girlfriend died on the same day earlier that month. Te’o’s story won him sympathy from the sporting press, and helped add to his campaign as a Heisman Trophy finalist. In January 2013, *Deadspin* revealed that the death of his girlfriend was not only fake, but that his girlfriend was actually a catfish operated by a male acquaintance of Te’o’s. Te’o had learned of the hoax in December, but continued to mention his girlfriend’s death in the weeks preceding his participation in the National Championship game in January.

The success of this con may appear, at first, to rely entirely on elements intrinsic to an Internet age awash in attention-seeking anonymity. We hear stories almost daily about marks getting duped by a comment troll, twitter bot, or catfish relationship. Yet compared to the historical versions of this swindle, our current Spanish Prisoners only differ in their method of delivery. The past is filled with Manti Te’os, and many of them suffered fates much worse than a broken heart and declining NFL draft stock. The enduring success of the prisoner swindle relies as much on the mark’s sentimentality and need for emotional connection as it does on their desire for a quick buck. The successful prisoner, then, is one that can combine a too-good-to-be-true offer with a compelling narrative that the victim can, literally, buy into.*‡

One of the best sources for Spanish Prisoner letters from the past can be found in the files of the Foreign Office (FO) and Metropolitan Police (MEPO) at the British National Archives. Britain has long been a target of the Spanish Prisoner, dating back at least to the Peninsular War in the early nineteenth century. Waves of the scam hit the island every twenty years or so afterward, as clever criminals used the backdrop of successive Spanish civil wars, known collectively as the Carlist Wars, to spin tales of wrongful imprisonment, political intrigue, and hidden treasure for their victims. It should be noted that many of these criminals probably did not write from Spain. In fact, as some members of the Met surmised, many of these “prisoners” were writing from England. Spain’s criminal reputation then, not unlike Nigeria’s reputation today, was as much the indirect result of endemic

Military fortress of Barcelona 11/11/95
Mr. Paul Webb

Dear Sir,

Although I only have the pleasure of being acquainted with you by the expressions that my dear wife a relative of yours gave me and that remembering the personalities of our family, always considered the merits and good qualities that distinguished you, I address myself to you precisely for the first and last time, because the gravities of my health compels me to make you know my sad position and to give assistance and protection for my only daughter Mary, a young girl fourteen years old who is now in a Prison House, owing inform you that my deceased wife was Mrs. Maria de la Torre Webb.

As I am here very watched by my enemies I must from you to keep a whole discretion and to direct not anybody with the slightest particular of this letter.

Being the private secretary and treasurer of General Martinez Campos in the last Cuban war and enjoying the whole confidence, I succeeded to make a good fortune to my daughter and by transactions with public funds I saw my fortune increase every day, although with the sorrow of being the mother, my very dear wife, would have succeeded in all my wishes, should my protection have followed in this place till the end of war, but General Weyler came to take the commandment of all the army and as I could not accompany my protector to Spain we could suffer to be under the orders of a political adversary I deserted and joined the army of rebellion in behalf of Republic that there we was witness of the greatest treason and I was compelled to emigrate to English ground with all my property valuable £ 37,000.

When I was being sent here in England I received the sad news that my wife had suddenly deceased leaving my dear daughter in despair and without any help. Under this misfortune I was compelled to return back to Spain, intending to take my daughter and bring her to America, but before working and considering how imprudent it was to take along with me so important an amount, I decided to place it in a sure English Bank against a private contract and only as a deposit as it appears from the receipt payable to bearer that the Bank gave me, as a guarantee, whose receipt I kept into a secret drawer of a workman, so cleverly made that the nearest eye cannot find it out.

Then, wholly satisfied that the money was assured I embarked for Spain, but on my arrival I was recognized, arrested and brought before the military authorities, that by my observation do the

money and without considering my political antecedents, condemned me to sixteen years of penal servitude that I must undergo in this fortress, when I am suffering so bitterly, that I am deprived of all communication outside, save with my daughter.

When I was detained all my luggage, as well as my particular revenues, were taken in great of that military Captain in order to respond to the payment of all the charges of my process.

I am only assisted here by the Chaplain of the castle, who is a friend and has become and protector and it is thank to him that I can write this letter, but I am aware of the gravities of my health and I foresee a very short and fatal end for me, by his reason and trusting on your discretion I dare beg you give protection, praying to be good enough to be my daughter's support and make her happy, as I fear that I shall never see her again.

My said luggage is kept by the military authorities but only you are acknowledged with the existence of his ticket drawer. If you are so good as to become my dear daughter's protector and advance the necessary amount to rescue my luggage, I hope you will inform me by cable, I then will send the Chaplain and my daughter to your house with all my luggage and I will also send you my last will, in which I will bequeath the whole part of all my property to your profit as a reward for your bounty and assistance.

I continue and dwelling always in your discretion all my daughter's future, I remain
 Affectionately yours
 Luis Ramos

P.S. As you can perfectly understand I cannot receive your reply directly but in order to win time I beg you, if you thought my properties to send me a cablegram telling it to me addressed as follows: P. Ramos - Esteta de Lopez - V. de Barcelona - Spain
 Said ramon
 Webb

The letter of Luis Ramos, 1905.
National Archives of the United Kingdom

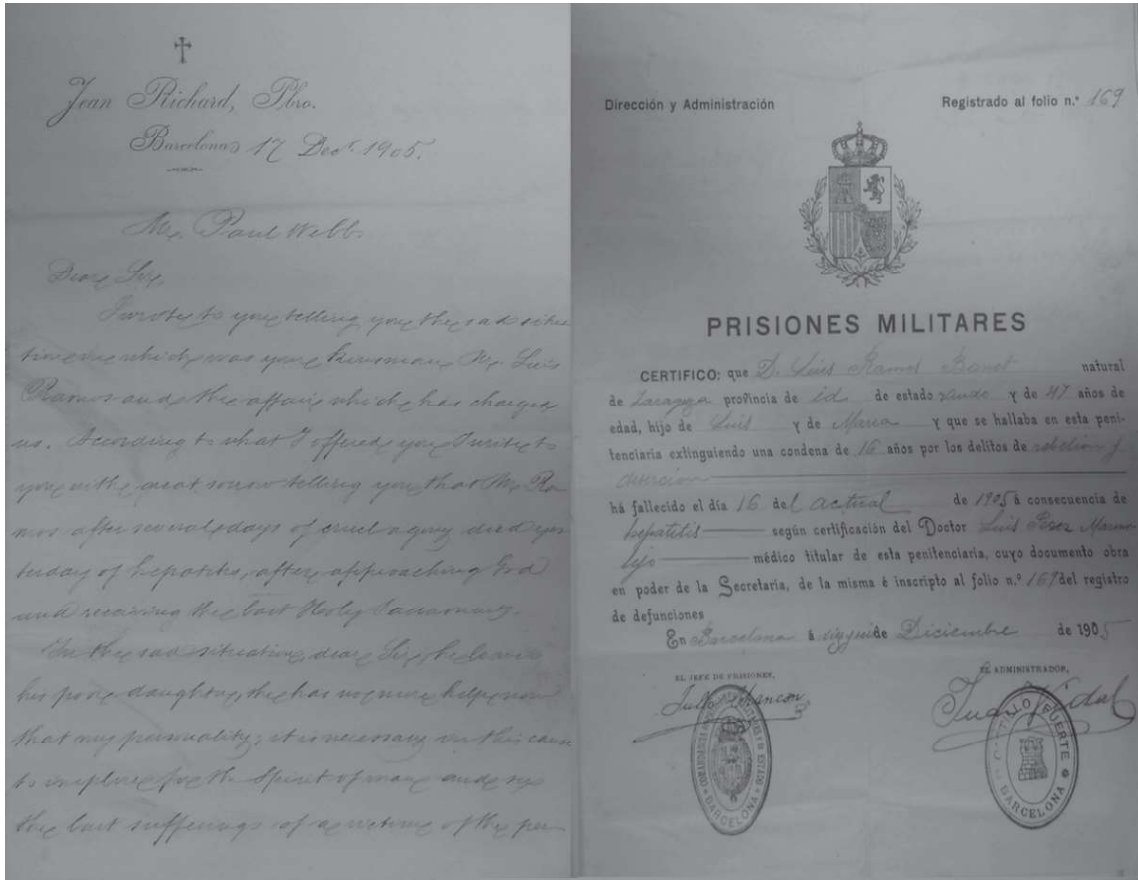
conflict as of actual wrongdoing. Nevertheless, the fact that some of these first letters originated from Spain makes the prisoner scheme one of the earliest and most enduring examples of international crime.*†

What is remarkable about these letters from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is their level of craftsmanship, both with regard to the prisoner's narrative as well as the physical trappings of the letters themselves. Take for instance the series of letters sent to Mr. Paul Webb, a Sloane Street shopkeeper, in 1905.

*Foreign Office examples include FO 227/8, FO 72/2027-28, FO 72/2140, FO 72/2228, FO 371/24218. This essay will draw on examples from the files of the Metropolitan Police, National Archives of the United Kingdom (hereafter NA).

†Britain, of course, was not the only victim of this scheme. Lawrence Gooley considers a version of the fraud that targeted people living around the Adirondacks during the early twentieth century.

Using above average diction and writing in a pleasant cursive, the prisoner “Luis Ramos” implores Mr. Webb to send funds to assist and protect his daughter, “a young girl of fourteen years old who is now in a Prison House.” Ramos, drawing from recent history, explains that he was the private secretary of General Martinez Campos during “the last Cuban war,” but owing to the replacement of Campos by Valeriano Weyler—“a political adversary”—Ramos left the army and joined the rebellion on behalf of the republic. Thanks to “the greatest treason,” Ramos was “compelled to emigrate to English ground with all my property valuable £37,000.” He decided to return home in order to take care of his daughter Mary. Ramos tells Webb that he left for Spain after depositing his



Richard's supporting documents.
National Archives of the United Kingdom

money “in a sure English Bank,” but was intercepted by the authorities upon disembarking and placed in a military prison in Barcelona. Complaining of an illness and certain that he will have “a very short and fatal end,” Ramos begs Webb to send funding that will release his daughter and his confiscated luggage, which contains the receipt for his English bank account in a secret drawer.

Webb responded to this correspondence by telegraphing Ramos’s designated intermediary, a prison chaplain named “Jean Richard,” to inquire about the situation. This telegraph led to another Ramos letter, which reiterated his impending death as well as his fear that his political enemies would surely find and punish his daughter if help did not arrive soon. Ramos also warned Webb not to alert authorities in Spain or Britain as it would

put his child at risk. This second Ramos letter, however, broke the drama, as it was sent to Webb, but addressed to a Mr. Thomas McGill, no doubt another potential target for the scheme. The criminal compounded the mistake by sending the same letter, now addressed to Webb, four days later. A follow-up letter was sent the next week in which Ramos wrote, “I feel that my life is going away...I have made my will by which I name my daughter my only heiress, appointing you her guardian.” He would “write no more, [as] neither my head nor my hand allow it to me; I pray you to forget not my prayer and to abandon us not as we have but you to save my poor Mary of her distress.”

That same day, Webb received a message from “Jean Richard,” the impostor prison chaplain, written in a different hand on what appears to be church stationery.

This letter verified the points of Ramos's story, and encouraged Webb to act, promising "God will protect you." After nearly a month of silence, Richard wrote again to tell Webb that "Mr. Ramos, after several days of cruel agony died yesterday of hepatitis, after approaching God and receiving the last Holy Sacraments." The chaplain included in this letter a copy of Ramos's will, his death certificate, and a Spanish newspaper notice regarding the prisoner's death. This final letter was the first to mention the advance needed from Webb in order to free Mary and Ramos' luggage: £59. Webb, however, did not fall for the ruse, and reported the correspondence to the Metropolitan Police (Met) the following week.

In the "Ramos" letters we have all the elements of a classic Victorian drama: faced with the death or imprisonment of parents, a child seeks a new guardian to share a large inheritance amidst the backdrop of continental political intrigue. The drama is reinforced by the educated content and sophisticated appearance of the writing as well as a seemingly genuine collection of supporting documents. Webb's telegraph after the first letter shows that, even if he was still skeptical, he believed the correspondence could be real. The criminal, though, squandered his chance by addressing the next letter to the wrong person.

"Ramos" made even worse mistakes, however. After receiving a long and detailed "Ramos" letter addressed to Mr. William Topley, the partners of Wm. Topley & Sons wrote to Scotland Yard informing them of the correspondence and explaining that the company's namesake had been dead for over twenty years. A year later, Mrs. Mary Bates brought the police a similar letter addressed to her husband, who had passed away seven years before. Mr. Harry Robertson of Mincing Lane wrote the Met with another example in 1908. Robertson explained that this was the fourth such letter he had received in his life, but

the first to switch his Christian name and surname (Dear Robertson Harry), and to claim familiarity through the prisoner's deceased wife (Mrs. Mary Harry)—a "new and rather amusing" touch, Robertson smirked. Other potential victims were not so amused, and went to great lengths to see that something was done. William Thomlinson, a mining executive based in British Columbia, wrote to Scotland Yard complaining about a prisoner letter and declaring, "if you are in touch with the authorities in Spain, perhaps these fakers can be caught and put to honest work, in jail."



Yet for the many of Ramos's letters that missed their mark, just as many found willing victims. "About 16th January last," wrote Superintendent Gordon of the Stirlingshire Constabulary, "Mrs. Margaret McAllister...received letter No. 1 of the enclosures [from "Jean Richard Pbro"]... and cabled in reply that she agreed to co-operate with the writer." After receiving additional letters from Richard, "she sent a cheque for £60 payable to Jean Richard Pbro...She received letter No.7 dated 13th February in acknowledgement of the cheque; but although she immediately thereafter wrote asking for more information, she received no word." Gordon wondered if "there is a chance of getting at Jean Richard Pbro," and if "the Barcelona Police would act much more readily for [the Met] than for [Stirlingshire]." "It seems a pity," Gordon continued, "that there should be no way of getting at that scoundrel."

A similar situation confronted George and Mary Sophia Vooght of Cricklewood, who

received a letter from a man signing himself as Alvaro de Guzman, stating he was in Prison at Murcia, Spain, undergoing twelve years imprisonment...and that he had a daughter who was in a college in Spain who

he was anxious to have sent to England to be educated and to live under the care of Mr. Vooght.

Guzman claimed to be a relative of Vooght through Guzman's deceased wife Mary. "As Mr. Vooght had a sister Mary whom he had not seen for many years," Sergeant W. Kemp reported, "he induced his wife to write to Guzman, offering to accept the girl Amelia, and have charge of her." Guzman replied by requesting that Vooght send £200 to his intermediary, Chaplain Jose Roig, in order to secure the girl's safe passage and the collection of her inheritance. Mrs. Vooght, becoming suspicious, wrote to a Magistrate in Murcia, but received a letter from Jose Roig, stating that this letter had been handed to him and that Guzman had passed away since their last exchange. Roig wrote that he needed £115 to help process the passage of Guzman's estate to his daughter and her new guardians. Mrs. Vooght responded by sending the money, but did not receive a reply. Mr. Vooght then asked a friend to write to Roig asking for an explanation. Roig replied to this letter by "stating he was in Prison for some offence he could not explain, but required £35 more to enable him to bring Amelia to England."*

Mrs. Vooght went to the police after this letter, at which point Sergeant Kemp "informed [her] the whole thing was a swindle and that we could not assist her, beyond forwarding the documents to the British ambassador

at Madrid." The British Embassy in Madrid, when they received word of these frauds, forwarded notices on to Spanish authorities, but warned that individuals living at the local addresses used by the criminals often "turn out to be mere innocent accessories to the fraud, who can prove their ignorance of the contents of the letters sent to their address; while the real swindlers remain uncaught, and continue their correspondence under a different name." The ability of these swindlers to intercept incoming letters from marks before they reached their local destination—as was the case with Mrs. Vooght's letter to the magistrate of Murcia—suggests that the "prisoners" were postal employees that handled foreign deliveries.‡

While most of these criminals eluded capture, authorities sometimes successfully foiled their correspondence campaigns. In one instance, the Spanish ambassador to Britain, Marquis de Villalobar, sent a list of addresses of potential British victims to Metropolitan Police Commissioner Edward Henry. The Met used this list to prevent at least one fraud aimed at Mr. Charles Clark, a London cycle dealer, who had already sent a positive reply to his first prisoner letter, but fortunately had not included any money. On other occasions, members of the public whose suspicions had been aroused helped the police. In 1910, a member of the advertising department of *The Daily News* warned police that he had received a series of strange notices for inclusion in the paper's classified section and believed they could be related to fraud. The Met followed up with the individuals that had placed these ads, and found that they had each received a prisoner letter that instructed them to place

*There is no firm evidence that the Vooght's criminal was our friend "Ramos," but his modus operandi (prison, orphan, chaplain) certainly suggests this. Unfortunately, Mrs. Vooght's letter to the Magistrate is not contained in this file.

‡Again, there is a chance that these criminals could have been postal workers in Britain, but the fact that the envelopes containing these letters featured Spanish stamps and postmarks suggests otherwise. There is also the language of the letters, which feature grammatical mistakes that appear honest rather than planned.

their reply in the newspaper. The police responded by placing warnings regarding this fraud in post offices across the country. Of course, even with these precautions and examples of public vigilance, the letters continued to arrive. Not unlike victims of the scheme today, those who were duped often left the incident unreported out of embarrassment.*



As can be surmised from the Met's files, the Spanish Prisoner Scheme witnessed a notable surge in Britain at the beginning of the twentieth century. This increase was undoubtedly influenced by the greater ease and reliability of cross border communication as well as the recent Spanish-American War. The technique of using war as part of the dramatic background for these frauds continued throughout the twentieth century, most obviously during the Spanish Civil War, but also earlier during the First World War, when several prisoners claimed to be wealthy Belgian refugees who fled to Spain after the Siege of Liège. Certainly, this type of opportunistic criminality is not unfamiliar to modern readers in the aftermath of Katrina and Sandy.

Another development specific to Britain—though part of the long history of social media—played an important role in that era's upsurge of prisoner letters. Beginning in 1897, *Who's Who*—a publication you might

*Henry wrote back on August 7, 1908, thanking Villalobar for his list, but lamenting that even with this information the police are often "too late to prevent loss on the part of deluded persons."

‡Olivier's letters often featured no name other than an intermediary contact. On a few occasions he signed the name Albert L. Martin. These letters, however, all appear to have come from the same source, as they feature the same text, similar supporting documents, and seem to use the same typewriter.

call a precursor to Facebook—began to print fuller descriptions of prominent individuals that included short biographies and vitas alongside official addresses and club memberships. Much like your oversharing friends today, the pomposity and vanity of the British elite listed in *Who's Who* could place them in harm's way. That fact was evident in a series of prisoner letters from Mexico collected by the Metropolitan Police during the 1930s and 1940s. "Vincente Olivier" of Mexico City sent dozens of letters to the cream of British society, including prominent business executives, military officers, ministers, and politicians. "A person," Olivier's letters began, "who knows you and who has highly spoken about you [i.e. *Who's Who*] has impelled me trust to you [sic] a very delicate matter of which depends the entire future of my dear daughter, as well as my very existence."[‡]

Olivier's letters followed the basic formula of Ramos's correspondence from decades earlier (prison, orphan, intermediary), but Olivier's typewriter allowed him to send a larger number of letters. Additionally, his use of *Who's Who* gave him a steady source of potential targets and helped him avoid making Ramos's frequent mistake of writing to the deceased. Although the Met never determined how Ramos chose his targets, his constant references to the deceased relatives of his letters' recipients could be a sign that the criminal laboriously scanned local death notices and obituaries for mention of residents with ties to Britain. Olivier's letters anticipated the modern spammer's preference for quantity over quality in prisoner letters. His work was hurried and only occasionally included the elaborate narratives

and supporting documents developed by Ramos and other swindlers decades earlier. Ramos had been a criminal, but with a class and skill utterly lacking in the average bot scammer today. The effort he undertook in order to commit crime almost makes you wish you could give him money, if for no other reason than to reward him for his dedication to his nefarious work.

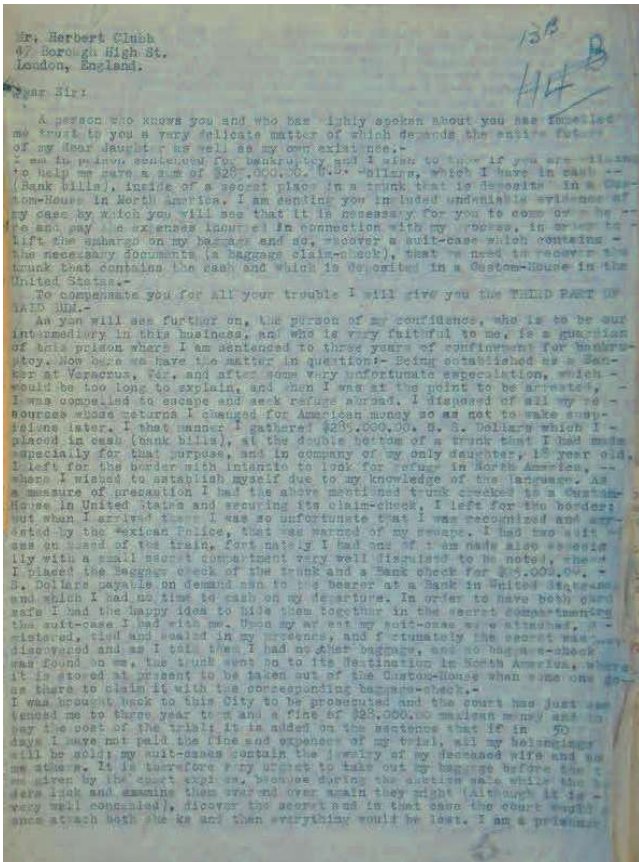
Though Olivier's letters lacked Ramos's panache, they retained the tactic of appealing as much to the victim's emotions and sentimentality as to their wallets. For those victims recently bereaved or simply lonely, the ability to lend aid to a dying man and his innocent daughter (who was

presented as a possible distant relative) often led to a response. Certainly, other victims were taken in by the opportunity for fortune or by the drama of political intrigue that these letters provided. More often than not, however, successful letters worked because the victims believed the story and felt that they played a crucial role in it. Earlier this year, people expressed amazement that Manti Te'o could be in love with someone he'd never seen in person; imagine the public incredulity if he had agreed to be the guardian of a non-existent orphan child. And yet it seems equally possible. We are always looking for easy money, but we are perhaps even more eager for a good emotion.



Here ends my story. I would gladly share the remainder of my narrative with you in return for a formal book contract from an academic publisher that I can use to escape my imprisonment and secure my future wellbeing. If you are willing and able, please forward said contract to my intermediary Robert Whitaker, courtesy of The Appendix. Please hurry! My graduate student funding runs short!

Your Most Insincere Servant,
Caraboo Ponzi
Madoff-Meinertzhagen III, Esq



Olivier's letter.
National Archives of the United Kingdom