File No. 113

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I

I

In the Paris evening papers of Tuesday, February 28, 1866, under the head of *Local Items* , the following announcement appeared:

“A daring robbery, committed against one of our most eminent bankers, M. Andre Fauvel, caused great excitement this morning throughout the neighborhood of Rue de Provence.

“The thieves, who were as skilful as they were bold, succeeded in making an entrance to the bank, in forcing the lock of a safe that has heretofore been considered impregnable, and in possessing themselves of the enormous sum of three hundred and fifty thousand francs in bank-notes.

“The police, immediately informed of the robbery, displayed their accustomed zeal, and their efforts have been crowned with success. Already, it is said, P. B., a clerk in the bank, has been arrested, and there is every reason to hope that his accomplices will be speedily overtaken by the hand of justice.”

For four days this robbery was the town talk of Paris.

Then public attention was absorbed by later and equally interesting events: an acrobat broke his leg at the circus; an actress made her debut at a small theatre: and the *item* of the 28th was soon forgotten.

But for once the newspapers were—perhaps intentionally—wrong, or at least inaccurate in their information.

The sum of three hundred and fifty thousand francs certainly had been stolen from M. Andre Fauvel’s bank, but not in the manner described.

A clerk had also been arrested on suspicion, but no decisive proof had been found against him. This robbery of unusual importance remained, if not inexplicable, at least unexplained.

The following are the facts as they were related with scrupulous exactness at the preliminary examination.

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The banking-house of Andre Fauvel, No. 87 Rue de Provence, is an important establishment, and, owing to its large force of clerks, presents very much the appearance of a government department.

On the ground-floor are the offices, with windows opening on the street, fortified by strong iron bars sufficiently large and close together to discourage all burglarious attempts.

A large glass door opens into a spacious vestibule where three or four office-boys are always in waiting.

On the right are the rooms to which the public is admitted, and from which a narrow passage leads to the principal cash-room.

The offices of the corresponding clerk, book-keeper, and general accounts are on the left.

At the farther end is a small court on which open seven or eight little wicket doors. These are kept closed, except on certain days when notes are due; and then they are indispensable.

M. Fauvel’s private office is on the first floor over the offices, and leads into his elegant private apartments.

This private office communicates directly with the bank by means of a narrow staircase, which opens into the room occupied by the head cashier.

This room, which in the bank goes by the name of the “cash-office,” is proof against all attacks, no matter how skilfully planned; indeed, it could almost withstand a regular siege, sheeted as it is like a monitor.

The doors, and the partition where the wicket door is cut, are covered with thick sheets of iron; and a heavy grating protects the fireplace.

Fastened in the wall by enormous iron clamps is a safe, a formidable and fantastic piece of furniture, calculated to fill with envy the poor devil who easily carries his fortune in a pocket-book.

This safe, which is considered the masterpiece of the firm of Becquet, is six feet in height and four and a half in width, made entirely of wrought iron, with triple sides, and divided into isolated compartments in case of fire.

The safe is opened by an odd little key, which is, however, the least important part of the mechanism. Five movable steel buttons, upon which are engraved all the letters of the alphabet, constitute the real power of this ingenious safe.

Before inserting the key into the lock, the letters on the buttons must be in the exact position in which they were placed when the safe was locked.

In M. Fauvel's bank, as everywhere, the safe was always closed with a word that was changed from time to time.

This word was known only to the head of the bank and the cashier, each of whom had also a key to the safe.

In a fortress like this, a person could deposit more diamonds than the Duke of Brunswick's, and sleep well assured of their safety.

But one danger seemed to threaten, that of forgetting the secret word which was the "Open sesame" of the safe.

On the morning of the 28th of February, the bank-clerks were all busy at their various desks, about half-past nine o'clock, when a middle-aged man of dark complexion and military air, clad in deep mourning, appeared in the office adjoining the "safe," and announced to the five or six employees present his desire to see the cashier.

He was told that the cashier had not yet come, and his attention was called to a placard in the entry, which stated that the "cash-room" was opened at ten o'clock.

This reply seemed to disconcert and annoy the newcomer.

"I expected," he said, in a tone of cool impertinence, "to find someone here ready to attend to my business. I

explained the matter to M. Fauvel yesterday. I am Count Louis de Clameran, an iron-manufacturer at Oloron, and have come to draw three hundred thousand francs deposited in this bank by my late brother, whose heir I am. It is surprising that no direction was given about it."

Neither the title of the noble manufacturer, nor his explanations, appeared to have the slightest effect upon the clerks.

"The cashier has not yet arrived," they repeated, "and we can do nothing for you."

"Then conduct me to M. Fauvel."

There was a moment's hesitation; then a clerk named Cavaillon, who was writing near a window, said:

"The chief is always out at this hour."

"Then I will call again," replied M. de Clameran.

And he walked out, as he had entered, without saying "Good-morning," or even touching his hat.

"Not very polite, that customer," said little Cavaillon, "but he will soon be settled, for here comes Prosper."

Prosper Bertomy, head cashier of Fauvel's banking-house, was a tall, handsome man, of about thirty, with fair hair and large dark-blue eyes, fastidiously neat, and dressed in the height of fashion.

He would have been very prepossessing but for a cold, reserved English-like manner, and a certain air of self-sufficiency which spoiled his naturally bright, open countenance.

"Ah, here you are!" cried Cavaillon, "someone has just been asking for you."

"Who? An iron-manufacturer, was it not?"

"Exactly."

"Well, he will come back again. Knowing that I would get here late this morning, I made all my arrangements yesterday."

Prosper had unlocked his office-door, and, as he finished speaking, entered, and closed it behind him.

“Good!” exclaimed one of the clerks, “there is a man who never lets anything disturb him. The chief has quarrelled with him twenty times for always coming too late, and his remonstrances have no more effect upon him than a breath of wind.”
“And very right, too; he knows he can get anything he wants out of the chief.”
“Besides, how could he come any sooner? a man who sits up all night, and leads a fast life, doesn’t feel like going to work early in the morning. Did you notice how very pale he looked when he came in?”
“He must have been playing heavily again. Couturier says he lost fifteen thousand francs at a sitting last week.”
“His work is none the worse done for all that,” interrupted Cavaillon. “If you were in his place—”
He stopped short. The cash-room door suddenly opened, and the cashier appeared before them with tottering step, and a wild, haggard look on his ashy face.
“Robbed!” he gasped out: “I have been robbed!”
Prosper’s horrified expression, his hollow voice and trembling limbs, betrayed such fearful suffering that the clerks jumped up from their desks, and ran toward him. He almost dropped into their arms; he was sick and faint, and fell into a chair.
His companions surrounded him, and begged him to explain himself.
“Robbed?” they said; “where, how, by whom?”
Gradually, Prosper recovered himself.
“All the money I had in the safe,” he said, “has been stolen.”
“All?”
“Yes, all; three packages, each containing one hundred notes of a thousand francs, and one package of fifty thousand. The four packages were wrapped in a sheet of paper, and tied together.”

With the rapidity of lightning, the news of the robbery spread throughout the banking-house, and the room was soon filled with curious listeners.
“Tell us, Prosper,” said young Cavaillon, “did you find the safe broken open?”
“No; it is just as I left it.”
“Well then, how, why——”
“Yesterday I put three hundred and fifty thousand francs in the safe; and this morning they are gone.”
All were silent except one old clerk, who did not seem to share the general consternation.
“Don’t distress yourself, M. Bertomy,” he said: “perhaps the chief disposed of the money.”
The unhappy cashier started up with a look of relief; he eagerly caught at the idea.
“Yes!” he exclaimed, “you are right: the chief must have taken it.”
But, after thinking a few minutes, he said in a tone of deep discouragement:
“No, that is impossible. During the five years that I have had charge of the safe, M. Fauvel has never opened it except in my presence. Several times he has needed money, and has either waited until I came, or sent for me, rather than touch it in my absence.”
“Well,” said Cavaillon, “before despairing, let us ascertain.”
But a messenger had already informed M. Fauvel of the disaster.
As Cavaillon was about to go in quest of him, he entered the room.
M. Andre Fauvel appeared to be a man of fifty, inclined to corpulency, of medium height, with iron-gray hair; and, like all hard workers, he had a slight stoop.
Never did he by a single action belie the kindly expression of his face.
He had a frank air, a lively, intelligent eye, and large, red lips.

Born in the neighborhood of Aix, he betrayed, when animated, a slight Provencal accent that gave a peculiar flavor to his genial humor.
The news of the robbery had extremely agitated him, for his usually florid face was now quite pale.
“What is this I hear? what has happened?” he said to the clerks, who respectfully stood aside when he entered the room.
The sound of M. Fauvel’s voice inspired the cashier with the factitious energy of a great crisis. The dreaded and decisive moment had come; he arose, and advanced toward his chief.
“Monsieur,” he began, “having, as you know, a payment to make this morning, I yesterday drew from the Bank of France three hundred and fifty thousand francs.”
“Why yesterday, monsieur?” interrupted the banker. “I think I have a hundred times ordered you to wait until the day of the payment.”
“I know it, monsieur, and I did wrong to disobey you. But the evil is done. Yesterday evening I locked the money up: it has disappeared, and yet the safe has not been broken open.”
“You must be mad!” exclaimed M. Fauvel: “you are dreaming!”
These few words destroyed all hope; but the very horror of the situation gave Prosper, not the coolness of a matured resolution, but that sort of stupid, stolid indifference which often results from unexpected catastrophes.
It was with apparent calmness that he replied:
“I am not mad; neither, unfortunately, am I dreaming: I am simply telling the truth.”
This tranquillity at such a moment appeared to exasperate M. Fauvel. He seized Prosper by the arm, and shook him roughly.
“Speak!” he cried out. “Speak! who do you pretend to say opened the safe? Answer me!”

“I cannot say.”
“No one but you and I knew the secret word. No one but you and myself had keys.”
This was a formal accusation; at least, all the auditors present so understood it.
Yet Prosper’s strange calmness never left him for an instant. He quietly released himself from M. Fauvel’s grasp, and very slowly said:
“In other words, monsieur, I am the only person who could have taken this money.”
“Unhappy wretch!”
Prosper drew himself to his full height, and, looking M. Fauvel full in the face, added:
“Or you!”
The banker made a threatening gesture; and there is no knowing what would have happened if they had not been interrupted by loud and angry voices at the entry-door.
A man insisted upon entering in spite of the protestations of the errand-boys, and succeeded in forcing his way in. It was M. de Clameran.
The clerks stood looking on, bewildered and motionless. The silence was profound, solemn.
It was easy to see that some terrible question, a question of life or death, was being weighed by all these men.
The iron-founder did not appear to observe anything unusual. He advanced, and without lifting his hat said, in the same impertinent tone:
“It is after ten o’clock, gentlemen.”
No one answered; and M. de Clameran was about to continue, when, turning around, he for the first time saw the banker, and walking up to him said:
“Well, monsieur, I congratulate myself upon finding you in at last. I have been here once before this morning, and found the cash-room not opened, the cashier not arrived, and you absent.”
“You are mistaken, monsieur, I was in my office.”

“At any rate, I was told you were out; that gentleman over there assured me of the fact.”
And the iron-founder pointed out Cavaillon.
“However, that is of little importance,” he went on to say. “I return, and this time not only the cash-room is closed, but I am refused admittance to the banking-house, and find myself compelled to force my way in. Be so good as to tell me whether I can have my money.”
M. Fauvel’s flushed face turned pale with anger as he listened to this insolence; yet he controlled himself.
“I would be obliged to you monsieur, for a short delay.”
“I thought you told me—”
“Yes, yesterday. But this morning, this very instant, I find I have been robbed of three hundred and fifty thousand francs.”
M. de Clameran bowed ironically, and said:
“Shall I have to wait long?”
“Long enough for me to send to the bank.”
Then turning his back on the iron-founder, M. Fauvel said to his cashier:
“Write and send as quickly as possible to the bank an order for three hundred thousand francs. Let the messenger take a carriage.”
Prosper remained motionless.
“Do you hear me?” said the banker angrily.
The cashier trembled; he seemed as if trying to shake off a terrible nightmare.
“It is useless to send,” he said in a measured tone; “we owe this gentleman three hundred thousand francs, and we have less than one hundred thousand in the bank.”
M. de Clameran evidently expected this answer, for he muttered:
“Naturally.”
Although he pronounced this word, his voice, his manner, his face clearly said:

“This comedy is well acted; but nevertheless it is a comedy, and I don’t intend to be duped by it.”
Alas! After Prosper’s answer, and the iron-founder’s coarsely expressed opinion, the clerks knew not what to think.
The fact was, that Paris had just been startled by several financial crashes. The thirst for speculation caused the oldest and most reliable houses to totter. Men of the most unimpeachable honor had to sacrifice their pride, and go from door to door imploring aid.
Credit, that rare bird of security and peace, rested with none, but stood with upraised wings, ready to fly off at the first rumor of suspicion.
Therefore this idea of a comedy arranged beforehand between the banker and his cashier might readily occur to the minds of people who, if not suspicious, were at least aware of all the expedients resorted to by speculators in order to gain time, which with them often meant salvation.
M. Fauvel had had too much experience not to instantly divine the impression produced by Prosper’s answer; he read the most mortifying doubt on the faces around him.
“Oh! don’t be alarmed, monsieur,” said he to M. de Clameran, “this house has other resources. Be kind enough to await my return.”
He left the room, went up the narrow steps leading to his study, and in a few minutes returned, holding in his hand a letter and a bundle of securities.
“Here, quick, Couturier!” he said to one of his clerks, “take my carriage, which is waiting at the door, and go with monsieur to M. de Rothschild’s. Hand him this letter and these securities; in exchange, you will receive three hundred thousand francs, which you will hand to this gentleman.”
The iron-founder was visibly disappointed; he seemed desirous of apologizing for his impertinence.

“I assure you, monsieur, that I had no intention of giving offence. Our relations, for some years, have been such that I hope—”
“Enough, monsieur,” interrupted the banker, “I desire no apologies. In business, friendship counts for nothing. I owe you money: I am not ready to pay: you are pressing: you have a perfect right to demand what is your own. Follow my clerk: he will pay you your money.”
Then he turned to his clerks who stood curiously gazing on, and said:
“As for you, gentlemen, be kind enough to resume your desks.”
In an instant the room was cleared of everyone except the clerks who belonged there; and they sat at their desks with their noses almost touching the paper before them, as if too absorbed in their work to think of anything else.
Still excited by the events so rapidly succeeding each other, M. Andre Fauvel walked up and down the room with quick, nervous steps, occasionally uttering some low exclamation.
Prosper remained leaning against the door, with pale face and fixed eyes, looking as if he had lost the faculty of thinking.
Finally the banker, after a long silence, stopped short before Prosper; he had determined upon the line of conduct he would pursue.
“We must have an explanation,” he said. “Let us go into your office.”
The cashier mechanically obeyed without a word; and his chief followed him, taking the precaution to close the door after him.
The cash-room bore no evidences of a successful burglary. Everything was in perfect order; not even a paper was misplaced.
The safe was open, and on the top shelf lay several rouleaus of gold, overlooked or disdained by the thieves.

M. Fauvel, without troubling himself to examine anything, took a seat, and ordered his cashier to do the same. He had entirely recovered his equanimity, and his countenance wore its usual kind expression.

“Now that we are alone, Prosper,” he said, “have you nothing to tell me?”

The cashier started, as if surprised at the question. “Nothing, monsieur, that I have not already told you.”

“What, nothing? Do you persist in asserting a fable so absurd and ridiculous that no one can possibly believe it? It is folly! Confide in me: it is your only chance of salvation. I am your employer, it is true; but I am before and above all your friend, your best and truest friend. I cannot forget that in this very room, fifteen years ago, you were intrusted to me by your father; and ever since that day have I had cause to congratulate myself on possessing so faithful and efficient a clerk. Yes, it is fifteen years since you came to me. I was then just commencing the foundation of my fortune. You have seen it gradually grow, step by step, from almost nothing to its present height. As my wealth increased, I endeavored to better your condition; you, who, although so young, are the oldest of my clerks. At each inventory of my fortune, I increased your salary.”

Never had Prosper heard him express himself in so feeling and paternal a manner. Prosper was silent with astonishment.

“Answer,” pursued M. Fauvel: “have I not always been like a father to you? From the first day, my house has been open to you; you were treated as a member of my family; Madeleine and my sons looked upon you as a brother. But you grew weary of this peaceful life. One day, a year ago, you suddenly began to shun us; and since then——”

The memories of the past thus evoked by the banker seemed too much for the unhappy cashier; he buried his face in his hands, and wept bitterly.

“A man can confide everything to his father without fear of being harshly judged,” resumed M. Fauvel. “A father not only pardons, he forgets. Do I not know the terrible temptations that beset a young man in a city like Paris? There are some inordinate desires before which the firmest principles must give way, and which so pervert our moral sense as to render us incapable of judging between right and wrong. Speak, Prosper, Speak!”

“What do you wish me to say?”

“The truth. When an honorable man yields, in an hour of weakness, to temptation, his first step toward atonement is confession. Say to me, Yes, I have been tempted, dazzled: the sight of these piles of gold turned my brain. I am young: I have passions.”

“I?” murmured Prosper. “I?”

“Poor boy,” said the banker, sadly; “do you think I am ignorant of the life you have been leading since you left my roof a year ago? Can you not understand that all your fellow-clerks are jealous of you? that they do not forgive you for earning twelve thousand francs a year? Never have you committed a piece of folly without my being immediately informed of it by an anonymous letter. I could tell the exact number of nights you have spent at the gaming-table, and the amount of money you have squandered. Oh, envy has good eyes and a quick ear! I have great contempt for these cowardly denunciations, but was forced not only to heed them, but to make inquiries myself. It is only right that I should know what sort of a life is led by the man to whom I intrust my fortune and my honor.”

Prosper seemed about to protest against this last speech.

“Yes, my honor,” insisted M. Fauvel, in a voice that a sense of humiliation rendered still more vibrating: “yes, my credit might have been compromised to-day by this M. de Clameran. Do you know how much I shall lose by paying him this money? And suppose I had not had the securities

which I have sacrificed? you did not know I possessed them.”
The banker paused, as if hoping for a confession, which, however, did not come.
“Come, Prosper, have courage, be frank. I will go upstairs. You will look again in the safe: I am sure that in your agitation you did not search thoroughly. This evening I will return; and I am confident that, during the day, you will have found, if not the three hundred and fifty thousand francs, at least the greater portion of it; and to-morrow neither you nor I will remember anything about this false alarm.”
M. Fauvel had risen, and was about to leave the room, when Prosper arose, and seized him by the arm.
“Your generosity is useless, monsieur,” he said, bitterly; “having taken nothing, I can restore nothing. I have searched carefully; the bank-notes have been stolen.”
“But by whom, poor fool? By whom?”
“By all that is sacred, I swear that it was not by me.”
The banker’s face turned crimson. “Miserable wretch!” cried he, “do you mean to say that I took the money?”
Prosper bowed his head, and did not answer.
“Ah! it is thus, then,” said M. Fauvel, unable to contain himself any longer. “And you dare—. Then, between you and me, M. Prosper Bertomy, justice shall decide. God is my witness that I have done all I could to save you. You will have yourself to thank for what follows. I have sent for the commissary of police: he must be waiting in my study. Shall I call him down?”
Prosper, with the fearful resignation of a man who abandons himself, replied, in a stifled voice:
“Do as you will.”
The banker was near the door, which he opened, and, after giving the cashier a last searching look, said to an office-boy:
“Anselme, ask the commissary of police to step down.”

III

If there is one man in the world whom no event can move or surprise, who is always on his guard against deceptive appearances, and is capable of admitting everything and explaining everything, it certainly is a Parisian commissary of police.

While the judge, from his lofty place, applies the code to the facts submitted to him, the commissary of police observes and watches all the odious circumstances that the law cannot reach. He is perforce the confidant of disgraceful details, domestic crimes, and tolerated vices.

If, when he entered upon his office, he had any illusions, before the end of a year they were all dissipated.

If he does not absolutely despise the human race, it is because often, side by side with abominations indulged in with impunity, he discovers sublime generosities which remain unrewarded.

He sees impudent scoundrels filching public respect; and he consoles himself by thinking of the modest, obscure heroes whom he has also encountered.

So often have his previsions been deceived, that he has reached a state of complete scepticism. He believes in nothing, neither in evil nor in absolute good; not more in virtue than in vice.

His experience has forced him to come to the sad conclusion that not men, but events, are worth considering.

The commissary sent for by M. Fauvel soon made his appearance.

It was with a calm air, if not one of perfect indifference, that he entered the office.

He was followed by a short man dressed in a full suit of black, which was slightly relieved by a crumpled collar.

The banker, scarcely bowing to him, said:

“Doubtless, monsieur, you have been apprised of the painful circumstance which compels me to have recourse to your assistance?”
“It is about a robbery, I believe.”
“Yes; an infamous and mysterious robbery committed in this office, from the safe you see open there, of which my cashier” (he pointed to Prosper) “alone possesses the key and the word.”
This declaration seemed to arouse the unfortunate cashier from his dull stupor.
“Excuse me, monsieur,” he said to the commissary in a low tone. “My chief also has the word and the key.”
“Of course, that is understood.”
The commissary at once drew his own conclusions.
Evidently these two men accused each other.
From their own statements, one or the other was guilty.
One was the head of an important bank: the other was a simple cashier.
One was the chief: the other was the clerk.
But the commissary of police was too well skilled in concealing his impressions to betray his thoughts by any outward sign. Not a muscle of his face moved.
But he became more grave, and alternately watched the cashier and M. Fauvel, as if trying to draw some profitable conclusion from their behavior.
Prosper was very pale and dejected. He had dropped into a seat, and his arms hung inert on either side of the chair.
The banker, on the contrary, remained standing with flashing eyes and crimson face, expressing himself with extraordinary violence.
“And the importance of the theft is immense,” continued M. Fauvel; “they have taken a fortune, three hundred and fifty thousand francs. This robbery might have had the most disastrous consequences. In times like these, the want of this sum might compromise the credit of the wealthiest banking-house in Paris.”

“I believe so, if notes fall due.”
“Well, monsieur, I had this very day a heavy payment to make.”
“Ah, really!”
There was no mistaking the commissary’s tone; a suspicion, the first, had evidently entered his mind.
The banker understood it; he started, and said, quickly:
“I met the demand, but at the cost of a disagreeable sacrifice. I ought to add further that, if my orders had been obeyed, the three hundred and fifty thousand francs would not have been in.”
“How is that?”
“I never desire to have large sums of money in my house over-night. My cashier had positive orders to wait always until the last moment before drawing money from the Bank of France. I above all forbade him to leave money in the safe over-night.”
“You hear this?” said the commissary to Prosper.
“Yes, monsieur,” replied the cashier, “M. Fauvel’s statement is quite correct.”
After this explanation, the suspicions of the commissary, instead of being strengthened, were dissipated.
“Well,” he said, “a robbery has been perpetrated, but by whom? Did the robber enter from without?”
The banker hesitated a moment.
“I think not,” he said at last.
“And I am certain he did not,” said Prosper.
The commissary expected and was prepared for those answers; but it did not suit his purpose to follow them up immediately.
“However,” said he, “we must make ourselves sure of it.” Turning toward his companion:
“M. Fanferlot,” he said, “go and see if you cannot discover some traces that may have escaped the attention of these gentlemen.”

M. Fanferlot, nicknamed the Squirrel, was indebted to his prodigious agility for this title, of which he was not a little proud. Slim and insignificant in appearance he might, in spite of his iron muscles, be taken for a bailiff's under clerk, as he walked along buttoned up to the chin in his thin black overcoat. He had one of those faces that impress us disagreeably—an odiously turned-up nose, thin lips, and little, restless black eyes.

Fanferlot, who had been on the police force for five years, burned to distinguish himself, to make for himself a name. He was ambitious. Alas! he was unsuccessful, lacking opportunity—or genius.

Already, before the commissary spoke to him, he had ferreted everywhere; studied the doors, sounded the partitions, examined the wicket, and stirred up the ashes in the fireplace.

"I cannot imagine," said he, "how a stranger could have effected an entrance here."

He walked around the office.

"Is this door closed at night?" he inquired.

"It is always locked."

"And who keeps the key?"

"The office-boy, to whom I always give it in charge before leaving the bank," said Prosper.

"This boy," said M. Fauvel, "sleeps in the outer room on a sofa-bedstead, which he unfolds at night, and folds up in the morning."

"Is he here now?" inquired the commissary.

"Yes, monsieur," answered the banker.

He opened the door and called:

"Anselme!"

This boy was the favorite servant of M. Fauvel, and had lived with him for ten years. He knew that he would not be suspected; but the idea of being connected in any way with a robbery is terrible, and he entered the room trembling like a leaf.

“Did you sleep in the next room last night?” asked the commissary.
“Yes, monsieur, as usual.”
“At what hour did you go to bed?”
“About half-past ten; I had spent the evening at a cafe near by, with monsieur’s valet.”
“Did you hear no noise during the night?”
“Not a sound; and still I sleep so lightly, that, if monsieur comes down to the cash-room when I am asleep, I am instantly awakened by the sound of his footsteps.”
“Monsieur Fauvel often comes to the cash-room at night, does he?”
“No, monsieur; very seldom.”
“Did he come last night?”
“No, monsieur, I am very certain he did not; for I was kept awake nearly all night by the strong coffee I had drunk with the valet.”
“That will do; you can retire,” said the commissary.
When Anselme had left the room, Fanferlot resumed his search. He opened the door of the private staircase.
“Where do these stairs lead to?” he asked.
“To my private office,” replied M. Fauvel.
“Is not that the room whither I was conducted when I first came?” inquired the commissary.
“The same.”
“I would like to see it,” said Fanferlot, “and examine the entrances to it.”
“Nothing is more easy,” said M. Fauvel, eagerly; “follow me, gentlemen, and you come too, Prosper.”
M. Fauvel’s private office consisted of two rooms; the waiting-room, sumptuously furnished and beautifully decorated, and the study where he transacted business. The furniture in this room was composed of a large office-desk, several leather-covered chairs, and, on either side of the fireplace, a secretary and a book-shelf.

These two rooms had only three doors; one opened on the private stairway, another into the banker’s bedroom, and the third into the main vestibule. It was through this last door that the banker’s clients and visitors were admitted.
M. Fanferlot examined the study at a glance. He seemed puzzled, like a man who had flattered himself with the hope of discovering some indication, and had found nothing.
“Let us see the adjoining room,” he said.
He passed into the waiting-room, followed by the banker and the commissary of police.
Prosper remained alone in the study.
Despite the disordered state of his mind, he could not but perceive that his situation was momentarily becoming more serious.
He had demanded and accepted the contest with his chief; the struggle had commenced; and now it no longer depended upon his own will to arrest the consequences of his action.
They were about to engage in a bitter conflict, utilizing all weapons, until one of the two should succumb, the loss of honor being the cost of defeat.
In the eyes of justice, who would be the innocent man?
Alas! the unfortunate cashier saw only too clearly that the chances were terribly unequal, and was overwhelmed with the sense of his own inferiority.
Never had he thought that his chief would carry out his threats; for, in a contest of this nature, M. Fauvel would have as much to risk as his cashier, and more to lose.
He was sitting near the fireplace, absorbed in the most gloomy forebodings, when the banker’s chamber-door suddenly opened, and a beautiful girl appeared on the threshold.
She was tall and slender; a loose morning gown, confined at the waist by a simple black ribbon, betrayed to advantage the graceful elegance of her figure. Her black eyes were large and soft; her complexion had the creamy

pallor of a white camellia; and her beautiful dark hair, carelessly held together by a tortoise-shell comb, fell in a profusion of soft curls upon her exquisite neck. She was Madeleine, M. Fauvel’s niece, of whom he had spoken not long before.

Seeing Prosper in the study, where probably she expected to find her uncle alone, she could not refrain from an exclamation of surprise.

“Ah!”

Prosper started up as if he had received an electric shock. His eyes, a moment before so dull and heavy, now sparkled with joy as if he had caught a glimpse of a messenger of hope.

“Madeleine,” he gasped, “Madeleine!”

The young girl was blushing crimson. She seemed about to hastily retreat, and stepped back; but, Prosper having advanced toward her, she was overcome by a sentiment stronger than her will, and extended her hand, which he seized and pressed with much agitation.

They stood thus face to face, but with averted looks, as if they dared not let their eyes meet for fear of betraying their feelings; having much to say, and not knowing how to begin, they stood silent.

Finally Madeleine murmured, in a scarcely audible voice:

“You, Prosper—you!”

These words broke the spell. The cashier dropped the white hand which he held, and answered bitterly:

“Yes, this is Prosper, the companion of your childhood, suspected, accused of the most disgraceful theft; Prosper, whom your uncle has just delivered up to justice, and who, before the day is over, will be arrested, and thrown into prison.”

Madeleine, with a terrified gesture, cried in a tone of anguish:

“Good heavens! Prosper, what are you saying?”

“What, mademoiselle! do you not know what has happened? Have not your aunt and cousins told you?”
“They have told me nothing. I have scarcely seen my cousins this morning; and my aunt is so ill that I felt uneasy, and came to tell uncle. But for Heaven’s sake speak: tell me the cause of your distress.”
Prosper hesitated. Perhaps it occurred to him to open his heart to Madeleine, of revealing to her his most secret thoughts. A remembrance of the past chilled his confidence. He sadly shook his head, and replied:
“Thanks, mademoiselle, for this proof of interest, the last, doubtless, that I shall ever receive from you; but allow me, by being silent, to spare you distress, and myself the mortification of blushing before you.”
Madeleine interrupted him imperiously:
“I insist upon knowing.”
“Alas, mademoiselle!” answered Prosper, “you will only too soon learn my misfortune and disgrace; then, yes, then you will applaud yourself for what you have done.”
She became more urgent; instead of commanding, she entreated; but Prosper was inflexible.
“Your uncle is in the adjoining room, mademoiselle, with the commissary of police and a detective. They will soon return. I entreat you to retire that they may not find you here.”
As he spoke he gently pushed her through the door, and closed it upon her.
It was time, for the next moment the commissary and Monsieur Fauvel entered. They had visited the main entrance and waiting-room, and had heard nothing of what had passed in the study.
But Fanferlot had heard for them.
This excellent bloodhound had not lost sight of the cashier. He said to himself, “Now that my young gentleman believes himself to be alone, his face will betray him. I shall detect a smile or a wink that will enlighten me.”

Leaving M. Fauvel and the commissary to pursue their investigations, he posted himself to watch. He saw the door open, and Madeleine appear upon the threshold; he lost not a single word or gesture of the rapid scene which had passed.

It mattered little that every word of this scene was an enigma. M. Fanferlot was skilful enough to complete the sentences he did not understand.

As yet he only had a suspicion; but a mere suspicion is better than nothing; it is a point to start from. So prompt was he in building a plan upon the slightest incident that he thought he saw in the past of these people, who were utter strangers to him, glimpses of a domestic drama.

If the commissary of police is a sceptic, the detective has faith; he believes in evil.

“I understand the case now,” said he to himself. “This man loves the young lady, who is really very pretty; and, as he is quite handsome, I suppose his love is reciprocated. This love-affair vexes the banker, who, not knowing how to get rid of the importunate lover by fair means, has to resort to foul, and plans this imaginary robbery, which is very ingenious.”

Thus to M. Fanferlot’s mind, the banker had simply robbed himself, and the innocent cashier was the victim of an odious machination.

But this conviction was, at present, of little service to Prosper.

Fanferlot, the ambitious, who had determined to obtain renown in his profession, decided to keep his conjectures to himself.

“I will let the others go their way, and I’ll go mine,” he said. “When, by dint of close watching and patient investigation I shall have collected proof sufficient to insure certain conviction, I will unmask the scoundrel.”

He was radiant. He had at last found the crime, so long looked for, which would make him celebrated. Nothing was

wanting, neither the odious circumstances, nor the mystery, nor even the romantic and sentimental element represented by Prosper and Madeleine.
Success seemed difficult, almost impossible; but Fanferlot, the Squirrel, had great confidence in his own genius for investigation.
Meanwhile, the search upstairs completed, M. Fauvel and the commissary returned to the room where Prosper was waiting for them.
The commissary, who had seemed so calm when he first came, now looked grave and perplexed. The moment for taking a decisive part had come, yet it was evident that he hesitated.
“You see, gentlemen,” he began, “our search has only confirmed our first suspicion.”
M. Fauvel and Prosper bowed assentingly.
“And what do you think, M. Fanferlot?” continued the commissary.
Fanferlot did not answer.
Occupied in studying the safe-lock, he manifested signs of a lively surprise. Evidently he had just made an important discovery.
M. Fauvel, Prosper, and the commissary rose, and surrounded him.
“Have you discovered any trace?” said the banker, eagerly.
Fanferlot turned around with a vexed air. He reproached himself for not having concealed his impressions.
“Oh!” said he, carelessly, “I have discovered nothing of importance.”
“But we should like to know,” said Prosper.
“I have merely convinced myself that this safe has been recently opened or shut, I know not which, with great violence and haste.”
“Why so?” asked the commissary, becoming attentive.
“Look, monsieur, at this scratch near the lock.”

The commissary stooped down, and carefully examined the safe; he saw a light scratch several inches long that had removed the outer coat of varnish.
“I see the scratch,” said he, “but what does that prove?”
“Oh, nothing at all!” said Fanferlot. “I just now told you it was of no importance.”
Fanferlot said this, but it was not his real opinion.
This scratch, undeniably fresh, had for him a signification that escaped the others. He said to himself, “This confirms my suspicions. If the cashier had stolen millions, there was no occasion for his being in a hurry; whereas the banker, creeping down in the dead of night with cat-like footsteps, for fear of awakening the boy in the ante-room, in order to rifle his own money-safe, had every reason to tremble, to hurry, to hastily withdraw the key, which, slipping along the lock, scratched off the varnish.”
Resolved to unravel by himself the tangled thread of this mystery, the detective determined to keep his conjectures to himself; for the same reason he was silent as to the interview which he had overheard between Madeleine and Prosper.
He hastened to withdraw attention from the scratch upon the lock.
“To conclude,” he said, addressing the commissary, “I am convinced that no one outside of the bank could have obtained access to this room. The safe, moreover, is intact. No suspicious pressure has been used on the movable buttons. I can assert that the lock has not been tampered with by burglar’s tools or false keys. Those who opened the safe knew the word, and possessed the key.”
This formal affirmation of a man whom he knew to be skilful ended the hesitation of the commissary.
“That being the case,” he replied, “I must request a few moments’ conversation with M. Fauvel.”
“I am at your service,” said the banker.

Prosper foresaw the result of this conversation. He quietly placed his hat on the table, to show that he had no intention of attempting to escape, and passed into the adjoining room.
Fanferlot also went out, but not before the commissary had made him a sign, and received one in return.
This sign signified, “You are responsible for this man.”
The detective needed no admonition to make him keep a strict watch. His suspicions were too vague, his desire for success was too ardent, for him to lose sight of Prosper an instant.
Closely following the cashier, he seated himself in a dark corner of the room, and, pretending to be sleepy, he fixed himself in a comfortable position for taking a nap, gaped until his jaw-bone seemed about to be dislocated, then closed his eyes, and kept perfectly quiet.
Prosper took a seat at the desk of an absent clerk. The others were burning to know the result of the investigation; their eyes shone with curiosity, but they dared not ask a question.
Unable to refrain himself any longer, little Cavaillon, Prosper’s defender, ventured to say:
“Well, who stole the money?”
Prosper shrugged his shoulders.
“Nobody knows,” he replied.
Was this conscious innocence or hardened recklessness? The clerks observed with bewildered surprise that Prosper had resumed his usual manner, that sort of icy haughtiness that kept people at a distance, and made him so unpopular in the bank.
Save the death-like pallor of his face, and the dark circles around his swollen eyes, he bore no traces of the pitiable agitation he had exhibited a short time before.
Never would a stranger entering the room have supposed that this young man idly lounging in a chair, and toying