

File No. 113

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Chapter 1	3
Chapter 2	4
Chapter 3	15
Chapter 4	42
Chapter 5	56
Chapter 6	71
Chapter 7	90
Chapter 8	103
Chapter 9	114
Chapter 10	122
Chapter 11	133
Chapter 12	152
Chapter 13	171
Chapter 14	179
Chapter 15	201
Chapter 16	216
Chapter 17	239
Chapter 18	256
Chapter 19	288
Chapter 20	311
Chapter 21	321
Chapter 22	332
Chapter 23	351
Chapter 24	359
Chapter 25	373

Chapter 1

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.

Chapter 2

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 Provençal 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.

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