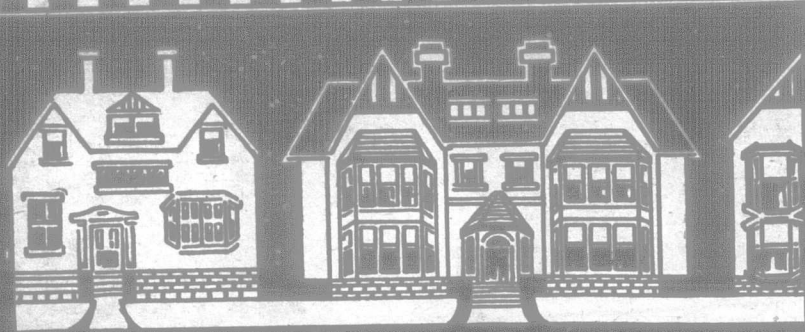




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room below, against my husband's wishes."

"Where were you, then, that you say 'in the room below'?" asked Lefevre suddenly.

"In the laboratory, on the second floor. My husband was confined in the basement. I said I would tell—for they were killing him. He cried out to me, forbidding me to do so. Then they took me away to the room above."

"And left your husband alone, with the snuff-box in his possession?" demanded the prefect sternly.

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"About—about ten minutes," she replied, wondering at his question.

"And you," exclaimed the prefect in a voice of fury, turning on Duvall, "were left alone in this room, with the snuff-box in your possession, for ten minutes, at the end of which time you calmly turned it over to this fellow Hartmann. Mon Dieu! Why did you not destroy it—crush it under your heel—anything to prevent our enemies from obtaining possession of it?"

He looked at Duvall, his face working convulsively.

"You—you are a—sacre bleu—I cannot tell you what I think of you."

"M. de Grissac," asked Duvall, his face white, "had I destroyed the box, or even only the key, could you have read these documents yourself?"

The ambassador gazed at him, puzzled for a moment. "Certainly not, monsieur," he replied. "I could no more have solved the cipher than they could. It was for that reason that I was forced to carry the key about with me. But it would have been infinitely better had the documents never again been read than to have them read by our enemies."

Without making any reply, Duvall placed his hand in his pocket and drew out, between his thumb and forefinger, a tiny white pellet, no larger than the head of a match.

"You are no doubt acquainted, M. de Grissac," he said coolly, "with your own handwriting?"

"My handwriting! Naturally. What of it?"

He went toward the detective, an eager look in his face. Lefevre, Dufrenne, and Grace also crowded about, their expressions showing the interest which Duvall's questions had aroused.

The detective began to unroll the little white pellet with the utmost deliberation. It presently became a tiny strip of tissue paper, not over two and a half inches long, upon which was written a series of numbers.

"Is that, then, your handwriting, monsieur?" he inquired carelessly, as he placed the strip of paper in De Grissac's trembling hand.

"Mon Dieu! The key!" fairly shouted the ambassador, as his eyes fell upon the bit of paper. "M. Duvall, what does this mean?"

"It means, monsieur," replied the detective coolly, "that while I was left alone in the room down-stairs I tore off the lower half of your key, which, luckily, was of sufficient width to enable me to do so, and with a fountain pen I had in my pocket, wrote upon the second strip of paper a series of numbers taken at random. This series I placed in the secret recess in the box. I do not think it will prove of much use to our friends in Brussels."

"Duvall!" cried Lefevre, rushing forward with outstretched hands. "Forgive me! Forgive me!" He was not quick enough, however, to forestall Grace, who with one cry of happiness had flung herself into her husband's arms.

"Richard!" she cried, and then sank sobbing but happy upon his breast.

M. Lefevre seized his assistant by the arm and began to shake his hand in a way which almost threatened to dislocate the young man's shoulder.

"My boy," he cried, laughing and crying at the same time. "Forgive me—forgive me. I was hasty. I should have let you speak first. God be praised, everything is well. De Grissac—think of it—they will puzzle their brains over that cipher for weeks and weeks, and they will discover nothing—nothing! Is it not splendid!" He grasped the ambassador's hand and embraced him with ardor. "Magnificent! Superb!"

The ambassador was no less overjoyed. "Young man," he said, "we owe you

the deepest apologies. No one could have done better. I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

Dufrenne also offered his congratulations.

"My friend," he said, "I have done you a great injustice. I salute you, not only as a brave man, but as a very shrewd one. As for me, I fear I am only an old fool."

Duvall patted the old man on the shoulder and smiled.

"A patriot, monsieur, and for that I honor you. I was luckily able to turn the tables on these fellows. But one thing you, and all of you, gentlemen, should know. Had I not been able to substitute a false key for the real one, the latter would never have passed into Hartmann's hands, if I had died for it."

"I know it, my friend. I was a fool, a dolt, even for one moment to doubt it. I ask your pardon; and that of madame, your wife," cried Lefevre, seizing Duvall's hands in his. Grace looked proudly at her husband, her knowledge of her own weakness forgotten in the triumph that he had won.

"And now, monsieur," said Duvall, with a look of happiness in his face as he caught his wife's glance, "with your permission Mrs. Duvall and myself will begin once more our interrupted honeymoon."

The prefect put his arm about the detective's shoulder, and gave him an affectionate hug.

"My poor children," he cried, smiling at Grace. "In my excitement, my happiness, I had completely forgotten that you are only just married. And such a honeymoon as you have had! It is indeed shameful, and the fault is mine—mine alone. But I shall make amends, my children. You have rendered both me and France a great service, and I do not forget it. I insist that to-night you shall dine with me."

"You, De Grissac," he exclaimed, turning to the ambassador, "will I know, be one of the party. And it is not alone for the purpose of dining that I ask you. Your service to France shall be acknowledged in a more substantial way. M. de Grissac and myself will have the honor to present to you, M. Duvall, and to your charming bride, some tokens of our gratitude and esteem. After that—go—enjoy your happiness. You have earned it."

He glanced at his watch. "Madame, you are fatigued. You need rest—sleep. I insist that you permit me to send you to my house, where Mme. Lefevre will have the honor to receive you and make you comfortable. You, Duvall, can in the mean time make your arrangements for leaving Paris to-night, and also secure your baggage from the pension in the Rue Lubeck, where it awaits you. I myself will accompany you, and render you any assistance in my power. We will then re-join your wife at my house, where M. de Grissac will meet us. What do you say?"

Grace clung to her husband's arm. "I'm afraid to leave him, even for a minute," she said.

Duvall pressed her hand, and noted her swollen eyes, her white and drawn cheeks.

"You have had a terrible night, dear," he said, kissing her, "and you must have a few hours' rest. Go to M. Lefevre's house and sleep for a little while. You are so nervous you can scarcely stand. I will not be long."

She gave his arm a little squeeze, then turned to the prefect.

"I thank you, monsieur, and since my husband thinks it best, I will gladly go to your house at once. Good-by, Richard." She accompanied M. Lefevre to the door.

Two hours later Duvall, having made all arrangements for leaving Paris for London that night, descended from the prefect's automobile at the latter's house in the Rue de Courcelles. Within an hour they had been joined by M. de Grissac, and were all seated about M. Lefevre's hospitable board.

Every one was in jubilant spirits, and in the happiness of the moment all the suffering of the past week was forgotten. De Grissac presented to the bride a magnificent diamond crescent, and to Duvall a gold cigarette-case of exquisite design and workmanship, while M. Lefevre, not to be outdone, placed in Grace's hand a rare lace shawl, which, he assured her, had been worn