

It was with some dismay, therefore, that he received, on the fourth day, a sudden visit from Dufrenne. The latter had been released the day before by the Brussels police, after a most uncomfortable night in a cell, an experience for which he knew he had Hartmann to thank; and in desperation had decided to place the condition of affairs before his chief.

The latter had heard him in silence. A long conference followed, with the result that Dufrenne returned to Brussels, bearing the mysterious message, subsequently given to Grace by Lablanche, to play "The Rosary" upon the phonograph.

Since then the prefect had been in a state of profound agitation, although he carefully concealed the fact from his subordinates. The gravity of the issues at stake tortured him ceaselessly; and to add to his discomfort, M. de Grissac arrived from London, determined to ascertain what progress, if any, had been made toward the recovery of his lost property.

He was bitterly disappointed to find that Lefevre was unable to give him the slightest encouragement. The box had not, he believed, passed into the hands of their enemies. Beyond that, he could say nothing.

It was on the day of the ambassador's arrival that Dufrenne appeared at the prefecture a second time, his face pale and haggard, his eyes bloodshot and sunken from loss of sleep, his whole manner indicating that he had lately passed through some terrible experience.

De Grissac was closeted with the prefect at the time; but the man's appearance, his urgent request that he see M. Lefevre at once, gained him an immediate audience.

The prefect and the ambassador stood awaiting his entrance, their faces tense with anxiety. The expression upon the old man's countenance confirmed their worst fears. He staggered into the room, grasping the back of a chair to support himself.

"He has given it up. The scoundrel! the traitor! he has given it up to save himself and his wife!"

The ambassador turned away with a groan of despair; Lefevre stepped up to Dufrenne.

"You mean to tell me," he cried, "that Richard Duvall has proven false to his duty? I cannot believe it."

Dufrenne nodded.

"He gave it to Hartmann last night. I saw him do it. Hartmann had promised to let him go free. They had been torturing him in some way, I do not know how. It was the woman who weakened first. The man—Duvall—gave up the box to save her from doing so."

"Then she knew where it was?"

"Yes."

The prefect went over to the window and looked out over the Seine. His emotions almost overcame him. The loss of the box, Duvall's faithlessness, his own failure—all plunged him into the deepest despair.

"Mon Dieu!" he muttered to himself.

"Duvall! It is incredible!"

Suddenly he turned. The ambassador had begun to question Dufrenne.

"What did this Dr. Hartmann do when the box was given to him?" he asked in a voice trembling with excitement.

"He pressed the large pearl, pushed aside the cross, and removed the paper that was hidden beneath it. He read the paper. It contained nothing but a row of numbers. I saw it as he held it beneath the light."

De Grissac became as white as chalk, and turning to Lefevre, cried out in a broken voice:

"It is all over! Nothing can be done now. It is too late. Mon Dieu! what will become of France?"

"Where is Duvall?" cried the prefect suddenly. "I must see him. He is not the man to do such a thing as this. I must talk to him. Do not tell me that he has run away."

"No, monsieur. He and his wife are outside. I have placed them both under arrest."

"Were they attempting to escape?"

"No, monsieur. They were coming to Paris."

"At least," the prefect remarked mournfully, "he is not cowardly enough for that. Bring him here—bring them both here at once. I must question them."

Dufrenne turned to the door.

"In a moment, monsieur, they will be before you."

"What can it avail now?" said De Grissac sadly.

"We shall see. I never condemn a man without a hearing." As he spoke, Duvall and Grace came into the room.

The prefect looked at his young assistant with an expression both grave and sad. He had always been very fond of Duvall. He was fond of him still. The whole matter had hurt him very deeply.

"M. Duvall," he said, without further preliminaries, "M. Dufrenne tells me that you, after recovering M. de Grissac's snuff-box from Dr. Hartmann, deliberately returned it to him last night, in order to secure your liberty and that of your wife. Is this true?"

"Yes," Duvall's voice was calm, even, emotionless. "It is true."

Lefevre recoiled as though he had received a blow. "Can you dare to come before me and tell me such a thing as that?"

"It was my fault, M. Lefevre," cried Grace, going up to him. "Richard begged me not to tell, commanded me not to tell, but they were torturing him, they were driving him mad. Oh—I could not stand it—I could not."

"You should have considered your duty, madame, not your husband," remarked the prefect coldly, then turned to Duvall.

"Young man," he said, "you have done a terrible thing. Perhaps even now you do not realize how terrible a thing I regret that I did not inform you at the time I placed the case in your hands, but the matter is one which, at all costs, I wished to remain a secret. Now it makes little difference."

"M. de Grissac has for many months been carrying on with the foreign office a correspondence regarding the relations of France and England in the matter of Morocco. Many details of action have been settled which, in the event of certain eventualities, would constitute the joint policy of the two nations. I need hardly say that these details and policies are of such a nature as to cause, if known, an immediate declaration of war by the third nation involved."

"This correspondence M. de Grissac, unwilling to trust to the ordinary cipher in use for such purposes, carried on in a code of his own; one which he regarded as absolutely proof against all attempts at solution. That desperate attempts to obtain copies of the correspondence would be made he well knew, and in spite of all precautions our enemies, by bribing a subordinate, did some time ago manage to secure copies of many of the most important letters and documents. Their attempts at reading them, however, were fruitless. Without the cipher and its key they could do nothing."

"How they ultimately learned that the key and the cipher were contained in the ivory snuff-box we do not know. Perhaps through Noel, the ambassador's servant, although M. de Grissac is positive that he never under any circumstances made use of the cipher in the presence of a third person. That they did learn the whereabouts of the cipher, however, we now realize only too well. When I told you that in the missing snuff-box lay not only my honor, but the honor of France, I indulged in no extravagant statements. It is the solemn truth. Even now, by means of the snuff-box and key which you have delivered to them, our enemies have no doubt read the stolen documents, and are preparing to strike while we are as yet unprepared."

He strode up and down the room in a state of extreme excitement.

"As a last desperate chance, I attempted to send you a message by means of the phonograph record. I hoped you might in this way learn the secret of the box, and by destroying the key, render it useless. If you hesitated to do this, fearing that should Hartmann discover that the key was missing he would refuse to liberate you, you are worse than a traitor. You are a contemptible coward. Let me tell you, M. Duvall, if I had a son I should rather have struck him dead at my feet than have had him fail me in a crisis like this."

Grace began to weep hysterically. "It was all my fault," she began. "I told them the box was hidden in the



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