POOR DOCUMENT

THE FLOWER GIRLS
—OF—
Marseilles!

CHAPTER I.

HOW BLANCHE DE CAZALIS FLED WITH PHILIPPE CAYOL.

Towards the close of the month of May a man about thirty years old was walking rapidly along a path in the Saint Joseph district, near the Aygalades. He had left his horse in the care of a farmer of the vicinity, and was going in the direction of a large, solidly built square mansion, a sort of country chateau similar to many found upon the hills of Provence.

He made a turn to avoid the chateau, and seated himself in the midst of a grove of pines which stretched out behind the dwelling. There, putting aside the branches, he uneasily and excitedly scanned the pathways, seeming to be impatiently awaiting some one. At times, he arose and walked a few steps; then he sat down again, all of a tremble.

This man, tall and strange looking, wore large black side-whiskers. His long face, full of energetic features, possessed a sort of violent and fiery beauty. Suddenly his eyes softened and his strong, thick lips assumed a tender smile. A young girl had just quitted the chateau, and, bending as if for concealment, was hastening in the direction of the grove of pipes.

Panting and rosy, she came beneath the trees. She was scarcely sixteen. Amid the blue ribbons of her straw hat, her youthful visage smiled with a joyous and frightened air. Her flaxen locks fell over her shoulders; her little hands, pressed against her bosom, strove to calm the bounds of her heart.

'How long you have kept me waiting, Blanche,' said the young man. 'I had given up all hope of seeing you.'

And he sided her to seat herself behind him on the moss.

'Pardon me, Philippe,' answered the young girl. 'My uncle has gone to Aix to purchase a property; but I could not get rid of my governess.'

She abandoned herself to the clasp of him she adored, and the two lovers indulged in one of those long chats so silly and so sweet. Blanche was a big baby who played with her admirer as she would have played with a doll. Philippe, ardent and mute, embraced and looked at the girl with all the transports of ambition and love.

And, as they sat thus, oblivious of the world, they raised their heads and saw that some peasants, who were passing along a neighboring path, were staring and laughing at them. Blanche, startled, drew away from her lover.

'I am lost,' said she growing deadly pale. 'Those men will tell my uncle. Ah! in pity save me, Philippe!'

At this cry, the young man arose with a hasty movement.

'If you wish me to save you,' replied he, impetuously, 'you must marry me. Come, let us fly together. To-morrow your uncle will sanction our marriage, and we can enjoy our tenderness forever.'

'Fly—fly,' repeated the girl. 'Ah! I have not the courage. I am too weak, too timid!'

'I will sustain you, Blanche. We will live a life of love!'

Blanche, without comprehending, without replying, allowed her head to sink upon Philippe's shoulder.

'Oh! I am afraid, I am afraid of the convent.' resumed she, in a low tone. 'You will love me always?'

'Yes, for I adore you! See, I am on my knees!'

Then, closing her eyes, abandoning herself to her fate, Blanche ran down the hill, leaning on Philippe's arm. As she departed, she gave a last look at the mansion she had quitted, and keen emotion brought great tears into her eyes.

A moment of heedlessness and terror had sufficed to cast her into her lover's arms, crushed and trusting. She loved Philippe with all the new-born ardor of her young blood and with all the madness of her inexperience. She escaped like a schoolgirl; she went voluntarily, without reflection, regardless of the consequences of her flight. And Philippe led her away, intoxicated with his victory, trembling to feel her walk and pant at his side.

The young man wished to hasten to Marseilles and procure a hackney coach. But he was afraid to leave Blanche alone upon the highway, and preferred to go on foot with her as far as his mother's country house. They were a league away from that country house, which was situated in the district of Saint-Just.

Philippe was forced to abandon his horse, and the two lovers stoutly began their walk. They traversed meadows, cultivated lands and groves of pines, striking across the fields and hurrying onward. It was about four o'clock. The sun, of a glowing yellow, threw before them broad sheets of light. And they hastened forward in the warm air, beneath the heat of the blue sky, urged on by the madness which was gnawing at their hearts. As they passed, the peasants raised their heads and watched their flight with astonishment.

It did not take them an hour to reach the country house of Philippe's mother. Blanche, worn out, sat down upon a stone bench at the door, while the young man went to procure a priest and send away those who might prove troublesome. Then he returned with the priest and took the young girl into his mother's house, where they were married, the man of God exacting a solemn promise from Philippe that, as soon as the civil ceremony could be performed, the nuptial vows should be renewed in church. The priest blessed the newly wedded pair and departed. Philippe had asked Ayasse, a gardener who was that day working for his mother, to go to Marseilles and find a hackney-coach.

The two lovers were in the fever of their flight. While awaiting the hackney coach, they remained silent and anxious. Philippe had seated Blanche in a little chair; kneeling before her, he gazed at her a long while and reassured her by gently kissing the hand she abandoned to him.

'You cannot continue to wear that light dress,' said he, at last. 'How would you like to put on men's clothes?'

Blanche smiled. She felt an infantile joy at the thought of disguising herself.

'My brother is of short stature,' continued Philippe. 'You shall wear his garments.'

It was rare sport. The young girl drew on the pantaloons laughing heartily. She was charmingly awkward, and Philippe greedily kissed the blushes on her cheeks. When she was dressed, she had the air of a little man, a boy of twelve. She had all the trouble in the world to keep her flood of hair in her hat, and her lover's hands trembled as they tucked in the rebellious curls.

Ayasse at length returned with the hackney-coach. He consented to receive the two fugitives at his domicile at Saint Barnabe. Philippe took all the money he possessed, and the three quitted the country house and entered the vehicle.

They stopped the hackney-coach at the bridge of Jarret, and went on foot to Ayasse's dwelling. Philippe had resolved to pass the night in this retreat

Twilight had come. Transparent shadows fell from the pale sky, and biting odors mounted from the earth, still warm with the sun's last rays. Then a vague fear took possession of Blanche. When, in the growing night, in the voluptuousness of the evening, she found herself alone with her lover, all her terrified young girl's reserve awoke, and she quivered, seized with all unknown dread. She abandoned herself; she was happy and terrified at giving herself up wholly to Philippe. She grew faint; she strove to gain time.

'Listen,' said she, 'I wish to write to the Abbe Chastanier, my confessor. He will see my uncle, will obtain my pardon from him and will, perhaps, induce him to sanction our marriage. It seems to me that I should trouble less and I his consent.'

Philippe smiled at the tender innocence of the last remark.

'Write to the Abbe Chastanier,' answered he. 'I will acquaint my brother with our retreat. He will come to-morrow and bear your letter.'

Then, the night came on, lukewarm and voluptuous. In the sight of Heaven, Blanche was Philippe's wife. She had given herself away, she had not uttered a cry of revolt; she had sinned through ignorance, as Philippe had sinned through ambition and love. Ah! that terrible flight! It was destined to strike the two lovers with misery and give them a world of suffering and regret.

It was thus that Blanche de Cazalis fled with Philippe Cayol one fine evening in May.

CHAPTER II.

MARIUS CAYOL.

Marius Cayol, the brother of Blanche's husband was about twenty-five years of age. He was short, thin and of unobstructive bearing. His yellowish face, pierced with long and narrow black eyes, lighted up at time with a good-natured smile of devotedness and resignation. He walked a trifle bent, with infantile hesitation and timidity. When the hatred of evil, the love of right, caused him to straighten up, he became almost handsome.

He had assumed all the hard tasks of the family, allowing his brother to obey his ambitious and impassioned instincts. He crouched beside him, saying, as a matter-of-course, that he was ugly and ought to remain in his ugliness; he added that it was pardonable in Philippe to love to display his lofty stature and the pronounced beauty of his visage. But, one occasion, he showed severity towards that grown-up unruly child, who was his elder and to whom he gave the advice and tenderness of a father.

Their mother, a widow, was without fortune. She lived with difficulty on the wreck of a dowry which her husband had impaired in trade. This money, invested with a banker, gave her a small income which enabled her to educate her two sons. But, when the children had grown up, she showed them her empty hands and brought them face to face with the struggles of life.

The two brothers, thrown thus amid the turmoil of existence, urged on by their different temperaments, took two opposite routes.

Philippe, who had the appetites of wealth and freedom, could not bend himself to work. He wished to gain fortune by a single stroke; he dreamed of making a rich marriage. That was, in his view, an excellent expedient, a speedy way of acquiring an income and a pretty wife. Then he lived in the sunshine; he transformed himself into a lover and even became somewhat of a high liver. He experienced the enjoyment of being finely dressed, of promenading in Marseilles his elegant rudeness, his garments of an original cut, and his glances and words of love. His mother and brother, who indulged him, strove to minister to his caprices. But Philippe, acted in good faith; he adored women; it seemed to him perfectly natural to be loved and abducted some fine day a noble, rich and beautiful young girl.

Marius, while his brother was displaying his good looks, had entered in the capacity of clerk the establishment of M. Martelly, a ship-owner who dwelt in the Rue de la Darse. He was satisfied in the gloom of his office; his whole ambition consisted in gaining a modest competence, in living quietly and unknown. Besides, he felt a secret delight when he aided his mother or his brother The money he made was dear to him, for he could give it away, make people happy with it and himself taste the profound bliss of devotedness. He had taken the straight road in life, the rugged pathway which leads to peace, joy and dignity.

He had gone to his office when he received the letter in which his brother announced to him his flight and marriage with Mademoiselle de Cazalis. He was seized with dolorous astonishment; he sounded at a glance the abyss into the depths of which the two lovers had cast themselves. He went with the utmost haste to Saint-Barnabie.

The dwelling of the gardener Ayasse had before the door an arbor which formed a little bower; two large mulberry trees trimmed in the shape of a parasol, stretched out their knotty branches and threw their shadows upon the threshold. Marius found Philippe beneath the arbor, gazing with uneasiness and love at Blanche de Cazalis, seated beside him; the young girl, already weary, was plunged in the oppression of first cares and first delights.

The interview was painful, full of anguish and shame. Philippe had arisen.

'Do you blame me?' asked he, offering his hand to his brother.

'Yes, I blame you,' answered Marius emphatically. 'You have committed a rash action. Pride has carried you away and love ruined you. You have not reflected upon the evils you are about to draw down upon your family and yourself.'

Philippe showed signs of rebellion.

'You are afraid,' said he. Litterly. 'I have not calculated; I loved Blanche and Blanche loved me. I said to her: 'Will you be my wife?—will you come with me?' and she came. That's the whole story. Neither of us is culpable.'

'Why do you tell an untruth?' resumed Marius, with greater severity. 'You are not a child. You well know that your duty was to defend this young girl against herself; you should have stopped her on the brink of the gulf, prevented her from following you. Ah! don't talk to me of love. I know only justice and honor.'

Philip smiled disdainfully. He drew Blanche upon his bosom.

'My poor Marius,' said he, 'you are a good fellow, but you have never adored a woman; you know nothing of love's fever. Behold my defence.'

And he allowed himself to be embraced by Blanche, who clung to him trembingly. The unfortunate girl felt that her only hope now was in this man. She had married him, she belonged to him; she had followed him as her sovereign master. Now she adored him like a slave; she crawled towards him, loving and timid.

Marius, in despair, comprehended that he would gain nothing by talking wisdom to the newly wedded couple. He resolved to act by himself; he wished to know all the facts of the case. Philippe answered his questions with docility.

'I have been acquainted with Blanche nearly eight months,' said he. 'I saw her for the first time at a public fete. She smiled at the crowd, and I thought her smile was addressed to me. From that day I loved her; I sought every occasion to approach her, to talk to her.'

'Did you not write to her?' asked Marius.

'Yes, many times.'

'Where are your letters?'

'She burned them. Each time I bought a bouquet of Fine, the flower girl of the Cours Saint Louis, and slipped my letter among the flowers. The milkmaid Marguerite took the bouquet to Blanche.'

'And your letters remained unanswered?'

'At first, Blanche refused the flowers. Then she accepted them, at last, she replied to me. I was mad with love. I dreamed of marrying Blanche, of adoring her forever.'

Marius shrugged his shoulders. He drew Philippe a few paces away and there continued the conversation with more firmness in his voice.

'You are an imbecile or a liar.' said he calmly; 'you know that M. de Cazalis, a deputy, a millionaire, and the all-powerful master in Marseilles, would never have given his niece in marriage to Philippe Cayol, poor, untitled and a republican as the climax of vulgarity. Admit that you have counted upon the scandal attending your flight to force the uncle to give you Blanche's hand.'

'And what if I have?' responded Philippe, impetuously. 'Blanche loves me; I did not force her to act against her will. She has freely chosen me for her husband.

'Yes, yes, I am aware of that. You repeat it too often for me not to know what I should believe in the premises. But you have not thought of M. de Cazalis' anger; that anger will fall terribly on you and your family—I know the man; this very evening he will have displayed his outraged pride throughout all Marseilles. The best thing you can do will be to take the young girl back to Saint Joseph.'

'No, I will not, I will not. Blanche would never dare to return home. She was in the country scarcely a week; I saw her as often as twice a day in a little grove of pines; we enjoyed in peace the freedom of the fields. Her uncle knew nothing, and the blow must have been severe for him. We cannot present ourselves at this moment.'

'Well, listen: give me the letter for the Abbe Chastanier. I will see that priest, if necessary, I will go with him to M. de Cazalis. We must stifle the gossip. I have a task to accomplish, the task of repairing your error. Swear to me that you will not leave this house, that you will await here my orders, my prayers.'

'I promise you that I will wait, if no danger threatens me.'

Marius took Philippe's hand and looked him squarely in the face.

'Love that child well,' said he, in a deep voice, pointing to Blanche; 'you can never repair the injury you have done her.'

He was about departing when Mme. de Cazalis advanced. She clasped her hands supplicatingly, forced back her tears.

'Monsieur,' stammered she, 'if you see my uncle, tell him that I love him. I am married. I wish to remain Philippe's wife and return to our house with him.

Marius bowed calmly.

'Hope,' said he.

And he went away, moved and troubled, knowing that he had deceived her and that hope was out of the question.

CHAPTER III.

THE ABBE CHASTANIER.

Marius, on arriving at Marseilles, hastened to the Saint-Victor Church to which the Abbe Chastanier was attached. Saint-Victor is one of the oldest churches in Marseilles; its black, lotty and embattled walls make it look like a fortress; one might think that it was fashioned entirely with ax strokes by the rude people of the port, who have a special veneration for it.

The young man found the Abbe Chastanier in the sacristy. This priest was a tall old man, with a long thin face as white as wax; his sad and humble eyes had the vague fixedness of suffering and poverty. He had returned from a burial and was slowly removing his surplice.

His history was brief and sorrowful. The son of peasants, as mild and innocent as a child, he had taken holy orders, urged on by his mother's pious wishes. In becoming a priest, he had wished to perform an act of humility, of entire devotion. He believed in the simplicity of his soul, that a minister of God ought to shut himself up in the infinitude of the divine love, renounce the ambition and live in the depths of a sanctuary, pardoning sins with one hand and distributing alms with the other.

Ah! the poor abbe! They showed him that simple souls are good only to suffer and remain in the shade! He soon learned that ambition is a sacerdotal virtue, and that young priests frequently love God for the worldly favors distributed by his church. He saw all his seminary comrades use their nails and teeth, and tear off here and there strips of silk and lace. He witnessed these private struggles, these secret intrigues, which make a diocese a little turbulent kingdom. As he remained humbly upon his knees, did not seek to please the ladies, demanded nothing and appeared stupidly pious, they threw him a miserable benefice as one cast a bone to a dog.

He remained thus more than forty years in a small village, situated between Aubagne and Cassis. His church was a sort of barn, whitewashed and glacially bare; in the winter, when the wind broke one of the window panes, the good God was cold for many weeks, as the poor cure did not always possess the few sous required to restore the glass. But he never complained; he lived peacefully in poverty and solitude, he even felt a deep joy in suffering, in feeling himself the brother of the beggars of his parish.

He was sixty when one of his sisters, who was a workwoman at Marseilles, grew infirm. She wrote to him and begged him to come to her. The old priest devoted himself so far as to ask his bishop for a little corner in one of the city churches. He was kept waiting for this little corner several months, and finally was called to Saint Victor He was destined to do there, so to speak all the heavy work, all the labors to which but little fame and profit were attached. He prayed over the coffins of the poor and took them to the cemetery; he even served as sexton upon occasion.

It was then that he began to suffer in earnest. While in his desert, he had been allowed to be simple, poor and old at his ease. Now, he felt that his poverty and innocence were considered a crime, and his heart was torn when he comprehended that there could be servants in the church. He saw plainly that he was looked upon with derision and pity. He bowed his head still lower, made himself more humble and wept to feel his faith shaken by the acts and words of the worldly priests who surrounded him.

Happily, in the evening, he had comfortable hours. He took care of his sister; he consoled himself in his way by devoting himself. He surrounded the poor infirm woman with a thousand little satisfactions. He took refuge beside her and lost himself in his tenderness. Then another joy came to him: M. de Cazalis, who distrusted young abbes, chose him to be the director of his niece. The old priest had hitherto taken charge of no penitent and very rarely confessed any one; he was moved to tears by the proposition of the deputy and questioned him he loved Blanche as if she had been his his own child.

Marius gave him the young girl's letter and watched his face to see what emotions that letter would excite in him. He saw keen grief paint itself there. But the priest did not seem to experience that stupor caused by overwhelming and unexpected news, and Marius thought that Blanche, in confessing herself to him, had avowed the relations existing between her and Philippe.

'You have done well to count upon me, Monsieur,' said the Abbe Chastanier to Marius. 'But I am very weak and awkward. I should have shown more energy.

The head and hands of the poor man had that gentle and sad trembling peculiar to old people.

'I am at your disposal,' continued he. 'How can I aid the unhappy child?'

'Monsieur,' answered Marius, 'I am the brother of the young fool who has fled with and wedded Mademoiselle de Cazalis, and I have sworn to repair the error, to stifle the talk. Will you unite with me? The young girl is lost if her uncle has already handed the case over to justice, Go to him, try to quiet his anger and tell him his niece is about to be restored to him.'

'Why did you not bring the child with you? I know the violence of M. de Cazalis; he will desire certainties.'

'It is that very violence which has frightened my brother. But we cannot reason now. The facts accomplished overwhelm us. Rest assured that I am as indignant as you are, and that I fully realize my brother's wretched action. But, in mercy, let us hasten. Afterwards we will speak of justice and right.'

'It is well,' said the abbe, simply. 'I will go with you.

They passed along the Boulevarde de la Corderie and reached the Cours Bonaparte, where was situated the deputy's city residence. M. de Cazalis, the day after the flight, had returned to Marseilles, in the morning a prey to terrible anger and despair.

To be continued.

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