POOR DOCUMENT

THE FLOWER GIRLS
—OF—
Marseilles!

(Continued.)

Revertegat was somewhat disturbed at having advised Marius to pay a visit to the banker.

'I forwarned you, Monsieur,' said he. 'I was not ignorant of the rumors in circulation respecting that man, but I attributed a large portion of them to slander. If I had known the whole truth, I never would have sent you to him.'

Marius and Fine passed the entire after noon in framing extravagant plans, in vainly racking their brains for the means of improving the fifteen thousand francs necessary to secure Philippe's safety.

'What!' cried the young girl, 'can we not find in this town a stout heart to extricate us from our embarrasament! Are there no rich people here who lend their money at a reasonable rate? Come now, uncle, help us a little. Name me some available person, that I may cast myself at his feet?'

Revertegat shook his head.

'Yes,' answered he, 'there are stout hearts here, rich people who, perhaps, might aid you. But you have no claim upon their kindness, you cannot demand money of them on the instant You must address yourself to the lenders, the note-shavers, and, as you have no solid security to offer, you are compelled to have resource to the usurers. Oh! I know old misers, old knaves, who would be enchanted to hold you in their claws, or who would throw you into the street as a dangerous beggar.'

Fine listened to her uncle. All these money questions were confused in her young head. She had a soul so open and so frank that it seemed to her altogether natural and exceedingly easy to ask for and obtain a large sum in a couple of hours. There were millionaires who could so readily dispose of a few thousand francs without the least trouble.

She presisted.

'Think well,' said she to the jailer. 'Do you really know of no man whatever with whom we can make an attempt?'

Revertegat gazed with emotion at her anxious countenance. He hesitated to spread the brutal truths of life before this child, full of the hopes of youth.

'Indeed,, responded he, 'I know of no man. I have spoken to you of old misers, of old knaves, who have acquired vast fortunes by shameful means. Like Rostand, they loan a hundred francs to get back a hundred and fifty in three months."

He stopped abruptly and then resumed, in a lower tone:

'Would you like me to tell you the history of one of these men? His name is Roumieu; he was formerly a public official. His specialty was making a terrible hunt after inheritances. Introducing himself into families, called upon by his duties to play the role of a confidant and friends, he studied the field and prepared his ambushes. When he encountered a testator of weak and wavering spirit, he became his creature, cozened him, won his favor, little by little, by reverences, cajolery and a shrewd comedy of small cares and filial tenderness. Ah! he was a cunning man! It was a sight to see him put his prey to sleep, make himself supple and winning, worm his way into an old man's friendship. Gradually he drove off the real heirs, the nephews and the cousins; then he wrote a new will which robbed them of their relative's fortune and named him as the sole legatee. He did nothing hastily; he devoted ten years to the attainment of his end, to the proper maturing of his rascalities; he proceeded with feline prudence, crawling in the background unweariedly, and leaping upon his prey only when it lay panting before him, rendered inert by his glances and his caresses! He hunted inheritances as a tiger hunts a hare, with a silent brutality, a velvet-footed ferocity.'

Fine thought she was hearing a tale from "The Arabian Nights;" she listened to her uncle, her eyes wide open with astonishment. Marius had begun to be familiar with roguery.

'And you say that this man has acquired a fortune?' said he to the jailer.

'Yes,' continued the latter. 'Strange examples are cited which prove the extraordinary cunning of Roumieu. For instance, ten or fifteen years ago, he managed to get into the good graces of an old lady who had a fortune of nearly five hundred thousand francs. He actually took possession of her like an evil spirit' The old lady became his slave to such an extent that she refused herself a morsel of bread, in order not to touch the money she wished to leave to this demon who ruled her like a master. She was literally possessed; all the holy water in the church would not have sufficed to exercise the fiend. A visit from Roumieu plunged her into ecstasies without end; when he bowed to her in the street, she was as if stricken by a fit—she grew red with joy. No one could ever conceive by what flattery, by what adroit and insinuating procedure, the notary had been able to penetrate so far into that heart which excessive piety had closed. When the old lady died, she despoiled her five hundred thousand francs to Roumieu. Everybody expected this denouement.'

There was silence for an instant. Revertegat resumed:

'I can cite yet another example. The anecdote contains a cruel comedy and proves Roumieu's rare suppleness. A man named Richard, who had amassed in trade several hundred thousand francs, had retired into the bosom of an honest family, the members of which took care of him and made his old age pleasant. In exchange for this kindly friendship, the former merchant had promised his hosts to leave them his fortune. They lived in that hope; they had numerous children and counted upon establishing them in an honorable fashion. But Roumieu happened to pass that way; he soon became the intimate friend of Richard; he took him occasionally to the country; he accomplished in perfect secrecy his work of taking possession. The family which gave the retired trader a home suspected nothing; the hosts continued to care for their guest, awaiting the inheritance; for fifteen years they had lived thus in delightful quietude, making plans for the future, certain of being happy and rich. Richard died, and the next day Roumieu was discovered to be his heir, to the great astonishment and despair of the honest familiy, robbed of its affection and its rights. Such is the hunter of inheritances. When he walks, his footsteps make no sound; his leaps are too rapid to be noticed; he has already sucked all the blood from his prey before he is seen crouched upon it!'

Fine was shocked.

'No, no,' said she, 'I will never ask such a man for money, Do you not know some other lender, uncle?'

'Ah! my poor child,' replied the jailer, 'all usurers are alike; all of them have some indeliable stain on their lives. I know an old miser who has a fortune of more than a million francs and lives alone in a dirty and abandoned house. Gaillaume buries himself in the depths of his foul smelling den. The dampness cracks the walls of the vault; the floor is not even paved, and one walks upon a sort of vile muck made of mud and rubbish; spider webs hang from the ceiling, dust covers every object and a dim, lugubrious light enters through the window panes black with greece. The miser seems to sleep in the filth, as the spiders of the beams sleep motionlessly amid their webs. When a victim becomes entangled in the nets he spreads, he draws it to him and sucks the blood from its veins. This man eats nothing but vegetables boiled in water, and never satisfies his hunger. He dresses himself in rags; he leads the life of a beggar and a leper. And all this to keep the money he has already amassed, to constantly augment his treasure. He lends only at a hundred per cent.'

Fine turned pale at the hideous spectacle of which her uncle gave her a glimpse.

'But,' continued the jailer,' Guillaume has friends who extol his piety. He believes neither in God nor the devil; he would sell Christ a second time if he could; but he has been crafty enough to feign great religious zeal, and this comedy has brought him the esteem of certain narrow-minded and blind people. One meets him crawling in the churches, kneeling behind all the pillars, using buckets of holy water. Question the town, ask what good action this godly personage has ever performed! 'He worships God,' will be the reply; but he robs his fellow creatures! No one can cite a person he has assisted. He lends at usurious rates, but does not give a sou to the unfortunate. A poor devil might die of hunger at his door, before he would bring him a morsel of bread and a glass of water. If he enjoys any consideration whatever, it is because he has stolen that consideration like everything else belonging to him!'

Revertegat paused, looking at his niece uncertain as to whether he ought to continue.

'And what if you should be foolish enough to go to such a man!' said he at length. 'I cannot speak of Guillaume's worst faults. This old man has evil instincts, at times, he forgets his avarice. People whisper of shameful orgies, of revolting dissipation—'

'Enough!' cried Marius sternly.

Fine, blushing and dismayed, hung her head, having no longer either courage or hope.

'I see that money is too dear,' resumed the young man. 'and that one must sell himself to buy it! Ah! If I only had the time to earn with my own hands the sum we need!'

They all three remained silent, totally unable to find any means of saving Philippe.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A RAY OF HOPE.

The following morning, Marius, urged by necessity, decided to apply to M. de Girousse. Since he had been endeavoring to raise the money he needed, he had often thought of making application to the old comte. But he had always recoiled from this idea; he feared the gentleman's singular bluntness; he dare not admit to him his poverty; he was ashamed to tell him what was to be done with the fifteen thousand francs he solicited.

Nothing could be more painful to him than to be obliged to put another party in possession of the secret of his brother's contemplated escape and M. de Girousse frightened him more than any one else.

When the young man presented himself, the hotel was empty; the comte had just departed for Lambese. Marius was almost happy at finding no one, so much did the step he was taking weigh upon him. He stood in the Cours, irresolute, not having the courage to go to Lambese, disheartened at being brought to a stand.

As he walked away, overwhelmed, with wondering eyes, he met Fine. It was seven o'clock. The flower girl, wearing her best dress, holding in her hand a small travelling bag, seemed to him resolute and radiant.

'Where are you going?' asked he in surprise.

'I am going to Marseilles,' answered she.

He stared at her with an air of curiosity, questioning her with a look.

'I can tell you nothing,' continued she. 'I have a project, but am afraid of failing. I shall return this evening. Don't give up all hope yet.'

Marius accompanied Fine to the diligence. When the lumbering vehicle started, he followed it for a long while with his eyes; that vehicle bore his last hope and would bring back to him anguish or joy.

Until evening, he hung around the arriving diligences. Only one more was to come, and Fine had not yet appeared. The young man, gnawed by impatience, walking back and forth with a nervous step, trembled lest the flower-girl should not return until the following day.

In the ignorance in which he was, not knowing what this final attempt might be, he felt that he lacked the courage to pass an entire night of anxiety and indecision. He paced the Cours, quivering, a prey to a sort of nightmare.

Finally, he saw the diligence in the middle of the Place de la Rotonde. When he heard the wheels rattle over the paving stones, violent palpitations seized upon him. He placed his back against a tree watching the travellers who got out, one by one, with exasperating deliberation.

Suddenly, he stood as if nailed to the spot. Nearly opposite to him, in an open door-way of the diligence, he had just seen appear the tall figure and pale, sad face of the Abbe Chastanier. When the abbe was upon the sidewalk, he put out his hand and helped a young girl to descend. This young girl was Mademoiselle Blanche de Cazalis.

Behind her, Fine leaped to the pavement with a light bound, without making use of the coach steps. She was radiant.

The two travellers, guided by the flower-girl, went towards the Hotel des Princes. Marius, who had remained in the darkness of the growing night, followed them mechanically, utterly unable to comprehend matters, as if stupefied.

Fine was ten minutes at most in the hotel. When she came out, she perceived the young man and ran to him, overcome with joy.

'I have succeeded in bringing them,' cried she, clapping her hands; 'now, I hope they will obtain what I desire. To-morrow, we shall know all about it.'

Then, she took Marius' arm, and told him what she had done during her absence.

The day before, she had been struck by the young man's remark to the effect that he regretted not having sufficient time to earn with his own hands the sum he needed.

Besides, her uncle's sadness had proved to her that it was almost impossible to find a lender, a reasonable usurer. The question then reduced itself to gaining time, to striving to postpone as far as possible the period when Philippe would be fastened to the pillory.

What terrified Fine and Marius was this disgraceful exposure, which delivered up culprits to the jeers and insults of the crowd.

The young girl's plan was immediately determined upon, a bold plan which, perhaps, would succeed by reason of its very audacity.

Her project was to go straight to the mansion of M. de Cazalis, to make her way to his neice and to spread out before her the picture of Philippe's exposure, with everything such a spectacle would have of a nature insulting to the young lady.

She would prevail upon her to aid her; they would go together to beg the deputy to intervene; if M. de Cazalis did not consent to ask for philippe's pardon, he would, perhaps, try to obtain a reprieve. Besides, Fine did not reason concerning her method of procedure; it seemed impossible to her that Blanche's uncle could resist her tears. She had faith in her devotedness.

The poor child dreamed wide awake when she hoped that M. de Cazalis would bend at the last hour. That proud and obstinate man desired Philippe's disgrace, and nothing in the world could have induced him to put an obstacle in the way of the accomplishment of his vengeance. If Fine had been compelled to struggle against him she would have been crushed; she would have utterly wasted her most enchanting smile and her most touching tears.

Happily for her, circumstances aided her. When she presented herself at the deputy's hotel on the Cours Bonaparte, she was informed that M. de Cazalis had been called to Paris by certain exigences of his political position. She asked to see Mademoiselle Blanche; the servant vaguely replied that Mademoiselle was absent, that she was travelling.

The flower-girl, greatly embarrassed, was obliged to retire and reflect in the street. All her plans were thrown into disorder; this absence of the uncle and the niece took from her the support upon which she had counted, and there was not a single friend to whom she could turn. She, however, did not wish to lose her last hope and return to Aix as desperate as on the preceding day, after having made a fruitless journey.

Suddenly, she thought of the Abbe Chastanier. Marius had often spoken to her of the old priest; she knew his kindness, his devotedness. Perhaps he could give her valuable information.

She found him at the house of his sister, the aged and infirm workman. She opened her heart to him; she explained to him in a few words the motive of her journey to Marseilles. The priest listened to her with marked emotion.

'Heaven has sent you here,' answered he. 'I think I can, under such circumstances, violate the secret which has been entrusted to me. Mademoiselle Blanche is not travelling. Her uncle, wishing to keep her out of sight and not being able to take her to Paris, hired for her a small house in the village of Saint Henri. She is living there with a governess. M. de Cazalis, with whom I am again in favor, begged me to make frequent visits to her and gave me extensive authority over her. Would you like me to conduct you to the poor child, whom you will find much changed and greatly dejected?'

Fine accepted with joy. Blanche turned pale when she saw the flower-girl and began to weep bitterly. A slight bluish circle surrounded her eyes; her lips were discolored and her cheeks as white as wax. One could see that a terrible cry, the cry of the heart and the conscience had broken forth in her and shaken her determination.

When Fine, in a gentle tone and with compassionate caresses, had made her comprehend that she could, perhaps, save Philippe from a supreme humiliation, she stood firmly up and said, in a broken voice:

'I am ready; dispose of me.'

'But,' observed the Abbe Chastanier, 'Mademoiselle Blanche cannot go alone to Aix. I must accompany her. I know that M. de Cazalis, should he hear of this journey; will reproach me in the gravest manner for it, I, however, accept the responsibility of the act, for I firmly believe I am doing my duty as a man.'

When the flower-girl had obtained the consent of both, she scarcely allowed the old man and the young girl time to make a few preparations. She returned with them to Marseilles, pushed them into the diligence and bore them triumphantly to Aix. The next day, Blanche was to go to the President of the court who had pronounced Philippe's sentence.

Marius, when Fine had finished her recital, kissed her warmly on both cheeks, which made a rosy glow mount to the young girl's forehead.

CHAPTER XIX.

A RE-PRIEVE.

Fine went to Blanche and the Abbe Chastanier the next morning. She wished to accompany them to the door of the President's hotel, to learn without delay the result of their undertaking. Marius, realizing that his presence would be painful to Mlle. de Cazalis, moved about the Cours like a soul in torment, following the two young girls and the priest in the distance. When the seekers for mercy had entered the hotel, the flower-girl noticed the young man and made him a sign to join her. They then waited, without exchanging a word, agitated and anxious.

The President received Blanche with great commisseration. He realized that she was the most cruelly stricken of all in this unfortunate affair. The poor child could not speak; she burst into sobs at the first word she attempted to utter, and her whole suppliant being begged for pity more touchingly than her prayers would have done. The Abbe Chastanier was compelled to explain their presence and present the request.

'Monsieur,' said he to the President, 'we come to you with clasped hands, Mlle. de Cazalis is already broken by the misfortunes which have overwhelmed her. She prays you in mercy to spare her a new humiliation.'

'What do you desire of me?' asked the President, in an agitated voice.

'We desire that you may, if possible, prevent an additional trouble. M. Philippe Cayol has been sentenced to public exposure, and that punishment will shortly be inflicted. But the infamy will not fall on him alone; there will be more than one culprit fastened to the pillory; there will also be a poor, suffering child, who asks pity of you. You understand, do you not? The cries of the the crowd insults, will rebound upon Mlle. de Cazalis; she will be dragged in the mud by the populace, and her name will circulate around the ignoble post, coupled with hateful jeers and foul expressions.'

The president seemed deeply touched. He was silent for a moment. Then, as if seized by a sudden idea, he inquired:

'Did M. de Cazalis send you to me? Is he aware of the step you have taken?'

'No,' answered the priest, with frank dignity; 'M. de Cazalis does not know we are here. Men have interests and passions which carry them away and sometimes prevent them from forming a clear judgment of their position. Perhaps, we are acting contrary to the desire of Mlle. Blanche's uncle in coming to solicit your intervention. But goodess and justice are above the passions and the interests of men. Therefore,' I have no fear of compromising my sacred character in taking it upon myself to ask you to be good and just.'

'You are right, Monsieur,' said the President. I understand the motives which have brought you here, and, as you see, your words have strongly affected me. Unfortunately, I cannat prevent the punishment; it is not in my power to modify a decree of the Cour d'Assises.'

Blanche clasped her hands.

'Monsieur,' stammered she, 'I do not know what you can do for me; but, I pray you, be merciful; think that it is I whom you have sentenced, and try to alleviate my sufferings.'

The President took her hands and replied with paternal gentleness:

'My poor child, I understand everything. My role in this affair has been painful. To-day I am grieved that I cannot say to you: 'Fear nothing, I can set aside the pillory, and you shall not be fastened to the post with the condemed.'

'Then,' resumed the priest, in dismay, 'the exposure must soon take place. You are not even permitted to retard the deplorable scene.'

The President had arisen.

'The Ministre de la Justice, upon the demand of the Procureur General, can postpone the execution of the sentence,' said he quickly; 'do you desire that the exposure shall not occur until the latter part of December? In that event, I shall be happy to prove to you the extent of my compassion and good will.'

'Yes, yes,' cried Blanche, eagerly. 'Postpone the terrible moment as long as possible. I shall, perhaps, be stronger then.'

The Abbe Chastanier, who was aware of Marius' projects, thought that, at the President's promise, he ought to retire, without further importunity. He joined Blanch in accepting the offer made to them.

'Very well; it is settled, said the President, accompanying them to the door. 'I shall ask that the course of justice be suspended for four months, and I am convinced that my request will be granted. Until then, live in peace, Mademoiselle. Hope; Heaven will, perhaps, send some consolation for your sufferings.'

The abbe and Blanche left the house. When Fine preceived them, she ran to meet them,

'Well?' asked she, breathlessly.

'As I told you,' answered the Abbe Chastabier, 'the President cannot prevent the execution of the sentence.'

The flower-girl turned pale.

'But the old priest hastened to add, 'he has promised to interpose to obtain a postponement of the exposure. You have four months before you in which to work for the prisoner's welfare.'

To be continued.

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