POOR DOCUMENT

THE FLOWER GIRLS
—OF—
Marseilles!

(Continued.)

'Do not say that, Philippe,' responded Blanche. 'I weep because I am an unhappy girl. See, I can scarcely walk. We would have done better to kneel before my uncle and pray to him with clasped hands.'

She made an effort and arose, and they continued their walk through that terrible region. It was not the wild and gay escapade of a couple of lovers; it was a sombre flight, full of anxiety and suffering, the flight of two trembling and silent culprits.

They traversed the territory of Gardanne, and stumbled for nearly five hours over the obstacles of the path. They finally decided to descend to the Aix highway, and there they advanced with less difficulty.

When they were at the top of the rising ground of the Arc, they dismissed Victor. Blanche had travelled six leagues on foot, among the rocks, in less than six hours; she seated herself upon a stone bench at the gate of the town, and declared that she could go no further. Philippe, who was afraid of being arrested if he remained at Aix, went in quest of a carriage; he found a woman seated in a cart, who consented to take Blanche and himself and conduct them to Lambesc, where she was going.

Blanche, despite the jolts, was soon in a deep slumber and did not wake until they reached the gate of Lambesc. This sleep calmed her blood; she felt rested and stronger. The two lovers quitted the vehicle. The dawn, came, a fresh and radiant dawn which filled them with hoped. All the phantoms of the night were gone; the fugitives had forgotten the rocks of Septemes, and walked side by side in the wet grass, intoxicated with their youth and their love.

Not having found M. de Girousse, of whom Phillippe had resolved to ask hospitality, they went to the inn, and at last enjoyed a day of peace and quietude. The inn-keeper, thinking his guests were brother and sister, proposed to prepare two apartments, Blanche smiled; she had now the courage inspired by tenderness.

'One room will do,' said she. Monsieur is my husband.'

The following day Philippe went to M. do Girousse, who had returned. He told him everything and asked his advice.

'The deuce!' cried the old noble, 'your case is grave. You know that you are a clown; a century ago, M. de Cazalis would have had you hanged for having dared to touch his niece; to-day, he can only have you cast in prison. Rest assured that he will not fail to do it.'

'What must I do?'

'What must you do? Send back the young girl to her uncle and gain the frontier as soon as possible.'

'You are well aware that I will never do that.'

'Then, quietly await your arrest. I have no other counsel to give you.'

M. de Girousse had a friendly bluntness which hid the best heart in the world. As Philippe, confused by the roughness of his reception, was about to depart, he recalled him, and, taking his hand:

'My duty,' resumed he, with a slight bitterness, 'is to have you arrested. I belong to the nobility you have outraged. Listen: I have on the other side of Lambesc, a small, unoccupied house, the key of which I will give you. Go conceal yourselves there, but say nothing to me about it; otherwise, I shall send the gendarmes after you.'

The lovers remained over a week at Lambesc. They lived there in retirement in the enjoyment of peace which was at times broken by sudden fears. Philippe had received the thousand francs from Marius. Blanche became a little housekeeper, and the twain ate with delight from the same plate.

This new existence seemed like a dream to the young girl. Occasionally she grew dissatisfied, and longed to return to her uncle's home; but she was afraid to speakof this; she felt that she was weak and alone; she had accepted the flight and lacked the courage to retrace her steps.

It was the octave of the Fete-Dieu. One afternoon, as Blanche stood at the window, she saw a procession pass. She knelt and clasped her hands. The young maidens, clad is white, sang in joyous tones, bearing in their midst the banner of the Virgin. At this sight the poor child began to sob; she imagined herself in a snowy robe, among the singers, and her heart bled when she realized that she was a fugitive.

That evening, Philippe received an anonymous note. It warned him that he would be arrested on the following day. He thought he recognized M. de Girousse's handwriting. Then the flight was renewed; it was harder to bear and more wretched than before.

CHAHTER VI.

HUNTED DOWN.

It was a bewildering confusion, a flight without intermission or repose, an incessant terror. Driven right and left by their fright, constantly thinking they heard behind them the gallop of horses, passing the nights running about the highways and the days trembling in the filthy chambers of inns, the fugitives traversed Provence many times, hurrying forward and retracing their steps, not knowing where to find an unknown retreat, hidden in the midst of some desert.

They quitted Lambesc on a terribly windy night and went towards Avignon. They had hired a little cart; the blast blinded the horse, and Blanche shivered in her miserable calico dress. As the climax of misfortune, they thought they saw in the distance, at one of the gates of the town, some gendarmes who were scanning the faces of the passers. Terrified, they turned about and went back to Lambesc, through which they merely passed.

They reached Aix, but were afraid to remain there; they resolved to gain the frontier, cost what it might. There they would procure a passport and find safety. Philippe, who was acquainted with a druggist at Toulon, decided that they would go by way of that city; he hoped that his friend would facilitate their flight.

The druggist, a burly, jovial fellow named Jourdan, gave them a hearty welcome. He concealed them in his own chamber, and said he would at once endeavor to get them a passport.

Jourdan had barely left the house when two gendarmes presented themselves.

Blanche nearly fainted; pale, seated in a corner, she restrained her sobs. Philippe, in a choking voice, asked the gendarmes what they wanted.

'Are you the Sieur Jourdan?' demanded one of them, with ill-omened harshness.

'No,' answered the young man. 'M. Jourdan has gone out, but he will soon return.'

'Very good,' said the gendarmes, coldly.

And he sat down, heavily. The poor fugitives were afraid to look at each other; they were full of terror; they felt unspeakable uneasiness in the presence of these men who had, without doubt, come to seek them. Their torture lasted half an hour. At length Jourdan returned; he grew pale on seeing the gendarmes and answered their questions with inexpressible confusion.

'You must come with us,' said one of the men to him.

'Why?' asked Jourdan. 'What have I done?'

'You are accused of having cheated at cards, last evening, at a club. You will have to explain matters to the Judge d' Instruction.'

A shiver of terror shook Jourdan. His face looked like that of a corpse. He seemed utterly overwhelmed, and, with the docility of a child, followed the gendarmes, who withdrew without even noticing the fright of Blanche and Philippe.

The Jourdan case, at that time, caused a great sensation in Toulon; but no one knew of the private and poignant scene which had taken place at the druggist's house on the day of his arrest.

This scene discouraged Philippe. He realized that he was too weak to escape from that human justice which was tracking him. Besides, he now no longer hoped to procure a passport and could not cross the frontier. Further, it was plain to him that Blanche had begun to be weary. He resolved, therefore, to approach Marseilles and wait, in the vicinity of that city until M. de Cazalis' anger had somewhat abated. Like all those in utter despair, he entertained at certain moments ridiculous hopes of pardon and happiness.

Philippe had at Aix a relative named Isnard, who kept a mercer's shop. The fugitives, no longer knowing at what door to knock, returned to Aix to ask Isnard for the key of one of his country houses. Misfortune pursued them; they did not find the mercer at home, and were obliged to hide in an old dwelling on the Cours Sextius, with a cousin of M. de Girousse's farmer. This woman hesitated to receive them, fearing lest, later, her hospitality should be considered a crime, she yielded only when Philippe swore to have her son exempted from military service. The young man was, doubtless, in one of his hopeful hours; he already saw himself the nephew of a deputy and made full use of his uncle's power.

In the evening Isnard visited the lovers and gave them the key of a country-house he possessed on the plain of Puyricard. He owned two besides this, one at Tholonet and the other in the Trois-bens-Dieux district. The keys of these were hidden under certain huge stones which he described to them. He advis them not to sleep two nights in succession beneath the same roof, and promised them that he would make every effort to keep the track of the police.

The lovers departed and took the road which passes beside the Hopital.

Isnard's country-house was situated to the right of Puyricard, between the village and the Venelles highway. It was one of those hideous iittle huts built of lime and stones heaped upon each other and adorned with red tiles; there was but a single apartment in it, a sort of filthy stable; remnants of straw were scattered about the floor and huge spider-webs hung from the ceiling.

Philippe and Blanche fortunately had a blanket. They collected the remnants of straw in a corner and spread the blanket over the heap. They passed the night amid the biting exhalations of dampness.

On the morrow they spent the day in the bed of the dried-up torrent of Touloupbre. Then, towards evening, they took the Venelles highway, made a circuit to avoid passing through Aix, and reached Tholonet. At eleven o'clock they arrived at the country-house which the mercer possessed below the Oratoire des Jesuites.

This hut was more comfortable than the other. It had two apartments, a kitchen and a dining-room; in the latter was a bed of spun yarn; the walls were covered with caricatures cut from the Charivari, and strings of onions were suspended from the white-washed beams. The two lovers thought themselves in a palace.

When they awoke in the morning, fear again seized upon them; they climbed the hill and remained until night in the gorges of the Infernets. At that period the precipices of Jaumegarde yet preserved all their sinister horror; the Zola canal had not pierced the mountain, and the fugitives did not venture into that gloomy tunnel of reddish rocks. Blanche and Philippe tasted profound peace in the midst of this desert; they reposed for a long while beside a spring which gushed, limpid and gurgling, from a gigantic block of stone.

With the night returned the cruel necessity of finding a shelter. Blanche could scarcely walk; her wounded feet bled on the pointed and sharp flints. Philippe knew that he could not take her far. He supported her, and slowly ascended to the plateau which overlooks the infernets. There stretched out uncultivated plains, vast fields of stones and vague territory hollowed out here and there by abandoned quarries. There is nothing so strangely sinister, as that broad landscape with horizons of mournful amplitude spotted now and again with low and dark verdure; the rocks, like broken limbs, pierce the barren soil; the plain, humped together, seems to have been stricken with death amid the convulsions of frightful agony.

Philippe hoped to discover a den, a cavern. He had the good fortune to come across a station, one of those little huts in which hunters conceal themselves to wait for the birds of passage. He broke open the door of the cabin without the least scruple and seated Blanche on a small bench which he felt beneath his hand. Then he went to pull up a large quantity of thyme; the plateau was covered with that humble gray plant, the biting odor of which clings to all the hills of Provence.

Philippe heaped the thyme in the station and made of it thus a sort of straw bed, spreading the blanket upon it.

And the two lovers, upon that miserable couch, gave each other the evening kiss. Ah! what meek suffering and bitter delight that kiss contained.

Philippe's love had become madness. Incessantly obliged to flee, menaced in his dreams of wealth, beneath the blow of an implacable chastisement, the young man rebelled and calmed his rebellion by pressing Blanche in his arms as if he would crush her The young girl was for him a vengeance; he possessed her as an irate master; he bent her beneath his kisses.

His pride increased. His ambition was largely gratified. A son of the people, he at last controlled the destiny of a daughter of those powerful and haughty men whose equipages had sometimes hurled mud into his face, and he recalled the legends of the country, the vexations of the nobles, the martyrdom of the people, all the cowardice of his fathers before the cruel caprices of the nobility. Then he took vengeance; he stifled Blanche with his caresses.

He had grown to feel a bitter joy in dragging her over the stones of the road. He did not avow these wretched thoughts; he hid from himself the cruelty of his conduct. The truth was that his beloved's anguish and fatigue rendered her dearer and more desirable to him. He would have loved her less in a salon, in the midst of peace. In the evening, when, broken by weariness, she fell beside him, he contemplated her with a cruel joy; the child's sufferings were another spur which augmented his strange love.

The lovers had passed the night amid the filth of the Puyricard country house. They were there, upon the straw, among the spider webs, separated from the world. Around them fell the grand silence of the slumbering heavens. They could love each other in peace; they no longer trembled; they were alone. Philippe would not have exchanged the squalid hut for a royal palace; he said to himself, with transports of pride, that a descendant of the Cazalis family was married to him and was with him in a stable. And on the morrow and the following days, what keen enjoyment to drag Blanche after him through the deserts of Jumegarde! He bore away his beloved with all the gentleness of a father and the violence of a wild beast.

He could not sleep in the station, the strong odor of the thyme, upon which he lay drove him mad. He dreamed, wide awake, that M. de Cazalis had received him with tenderness and that he had been named deputy as the successor of his uncle. At times he heard the dolorous sighs of Blanche, who was dozing at his side, feverish and agitated.

The young girl had come to consider her flight with Philippe as a nightmare, full of dolorous terrors. She remained, during the day, stupefied by fatigue; she smiled sadly, but never complained. Her inexperience had made her accept the departure, and her weak character prevented her from demanding that they should return. She belonged body and soul to this man, who was carrying her in his arms; she would have preferred not to walk so much, but she had no idea of quitting Philippe; she continued innocently to believe that her uncle would sanction their marriage, and that it was only necessary to run about among the rocks for a few days longer. She was a big baby, who had had the misfortune to be a woman before the proper age.

At sunrise the fugitives quitted their retreat. Their garments began to be terribly torn, and poor Blanche's shoes had holes in them. In the coolness of the morning, amid the sharp perfumes of the plateau which the new-born sunbeams flooded with yellow and pink light, the lovers forgot for an hour their misery and their abandonment. They laughingly declared that they were ferociously hungry.

Then Philippe made Blanche enter the station, and hastened to Tholonet for provisions. He was gone half an hour. When he returned, he found the young girl frightened; she asserted that she had seen wolves pass.

A broad stone slab served as the breakfast table. Blanche and Phllippe looked like a couple of Gypsy lovers breakfasting in the open air. After breakfast, the twain walked to the middle of the plateau where they remained all day. They passed there, perhaps, the happiest hours of their love-life.

But, when twilight came on, they were afraid; they did not wish to spend another night in that solitude. The warmish and pure air of the hill had given them hopes and milder thoughts.

'Are you weary, my child?' asked Philippe of Blanche.

'Oh! yes,' answered the young girl.

'Listen: we will make a last journey. Let us go to the country house which Isnard owns in the Trois-bons-Dieux district, and remain there until your uncle pardons us or causes my arrest.'

'My uncle will pardon us.'

'I dare not believe you. At any rate I desire to flee no longer; you have need of rest. Come; we will walk slowly.'

They crossed the plateau, going away from the Infernets, leaving to the right the Chateau de Saint Marc, which they saw upon the height. In an hour they reached their destination.

Isnard's country house was on the hill which stretches to the left of the Vauvenargues highway, when one has passed the Vallon de Repentance. It was a little, two-story cabin; on the first floor there was but one apartment, in which stood a rickety table and three seatless chairs. A wooden ladder led to the chamber above, a sort of garret entirely bare, where the lovers found as the only furniture a wretched mattress placed upon a pile of hay. Isnard had charitably put a white sheet at the foot of the mattress.

Philippe's intention was to go to Aix on the morrow, and obtain information as to M. de Cazalis' designs in regard to himself. He knew that he could not conceal himself much longer; he retired almost in peace, calmed by the soothing words of Blanche, who judged events with a young girl's hopefulness.

For twenty days the fugitives had been running about the fields. For twenty days the gendarmes had been scouring the country, following in their tracks, sometimes taking the wrong road but always brought back to the scent by some trifling circumstance. M. de Cazalis' anger had increased at all these delays; his pride was irritated by each fresh obstacle. At Lambesc the gendarmes had presented themselves a few hours too late; at Toulon the passage of the fugitives had been signaled only the day after their return to Aix; everywhere, Philippe and Blanche escaped as by a miracle. At last, the deputy accused the police of bad faith.

Finally, he was assured that the lovers were in the neighborhood of Aix and were about to be arrested. He hurried to Aix; he wished to assist in the search.

The woman of the Cours Sextius, who had harbored Blanche and Philippe for a few hours, had been stricken with terror; that she might not be accused of complicity, she told all; she said that the young folks must be concealed in one of Isnard's country houses.

On being questioned, Isnard calmly denied everything. He declared that he had not seen his relative for several months. This took place at the very time Philippe and Blanche were entering the country house of the Trois-bons-Dieux district. The mercer could not warn the lovers during the night. At five o'clock the next morning; a commissaire de police knocked at his door and informed him that a search was about to be made at his house and at his three properties.

M. de Cazalis remained at Aix, declaring that he feared he might kill Philippe if he met him face to face. The agents who were directed to visit the Puyricard country house found the nest empty. Isnard obligingly offered to conduct two gendarmes to his Tholonet property, suspecting that it would be a useless errand. The commissaire de police, accompanied also by two gendarmes, started for the Trois-bons-Dieux district; he took a locksmith with him, Isnard having stated vaguely that the key of the house was hidden under a stone to the right of the door.

It was about six o'clock when the commissaire reached the country house. All the openings were closed; no sound came from the interior. The commissaire advanced and cried, in a loud voice, pounding upon the door with his fist:

'In the name of the law, open!'

Echo alone answered. Nothing stirred. After several minutes, the commissaire turned to the locksmith and said:

'Pick the lock.'

The locksmith went to work. The scraping of the iron broke the silence. Then the shutter of a window opened violently, and, amid the golden brightness of the rising sun, his neck and arms bare, appeared Philippe Cayol, disdainful and angry.

'What do you want?' said he, leaning his elbows heavily on the window sill.

At the first blow dealt upon the door by the commissaire, Philippe and Blanche suddenly awoke. Seated on the mattress, amid the tremors of awakening she heard with anxiety the sound of voices.

The cry, 'In the name of the law!' that terrible cry which bursts upon the ears of the guilty like a clap of thunder, nearly deprived the young man of breath. He started up, trembling, dismayed, not knowing what to do. The young girl, her eyes yet heavy with sleep, wrapped herself in the sheet and wept with shame and despair.

Philippe comprehended that all was over, and that he could do nothing but surrender. A sullen revolt stirred in him. So his dreams of wealth were dead; he never would be acknowledged as Blanche's husband; he had carried off an heiress to be cast into prison; at the denouement, instead of the lordly dwelling of which he had dreamed, he would find a dungeon. Then a cowardly thought came to him; he entertained the idea of leaving his beloved there and fleeing in the direction of Vauvenargues to the gorges of Saint Victoire; perhaps he might escape through a window at the back of the country house. He leaned towards Blanche, and, hesitatingly, told her his plan in a low voice. The young girl, who was choking with sobs, did not understand him, did not hear him. He saw with anguish that, mentally, she was not in a condition to cover his flight.

At that moment, he heard the sharp sound of the hooks which the locksmith had inserted in the lock. The secret and poignant drama, which was in progress in that bare chamber, had lasted at most two or three minutes.

To be continued.

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