POOR DOCUMENT

THE FLOWER GIRLS
—OF—
Marseilles!

(Continued.)

'I thank you,' said he. 'I will see Rostand to-morrow morning.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE USURERS.

The Sieur Rostand was a shrewd man. He carried on his infamous business with great ability. To put an honorable stamp upon his vacation, he had opened a banking-house; he paid his license; he was legally established. On occaison, he even knew how to show a little honesty; he loaned money at the same rate as his brethern, the bankers of the town. But, in his establishment, there was, so to speak, a back shop in which he lovingly elaborated his rascalities.

Six months after the opening of his banking house, he became the manager of a body of usurers, of a scoundrelly band which entrusted him with funds. The combination was of a patriarchal simplicity. People who had the bump of usury and were afraid to operate on their own account, at their own risk and peril, brought him their money and begged him to make the most out of it he could. He thus controlled a rapid circulation of funds to a considerable amount, and could largely take advantage of the need of borrowers. Those who furnished the money remained in the background. He solemnly engaged to loan at fabulous rates, at fifty, sixty and even eighty per cent. Each month, the capitalists met at his house he presented his accounts and divided the profits. And he so arranged matters as to keep the largest share for himself, to rob the robbers.

He always sought those doing a small trade. When a merchant, the day before an obligation fell due, desired to borrow, he imposed exorbitant conditions upon him. The merchant invariably accepted them. Rostand had thus caused more than fifty failures in ten years. Everything was grist to his mill; he as readily lent a hundred sous to a dealer in vegetables as a thousand francs to a cattle merchant; he systematically sheared the town; he did not lose an opportunity of giving ten francs to secure a return of twenty the next day. He watched the eldest sons of high families, the young reprobates who threw money out of the windows; he filled their hands with gold pieces that they might throw more, and stood below to pick up what fell. He also made trips into the country to tempt peasants, and, when the harvests failed, tore from them, strip by strip, their farms and their lands.

This house was a veritable trap in which fortunes were swallowed up. People, entire families, whom he had ruined were cited. Everybody knew the secret springs of his trade. They pointed out his capitalists; rich men, former ministerial officials, merchants and even workmen. But they had no proofs. Rostand's license protected him, and he was too cunning to allow himself to be caught at crime.

Once only in his infamous career had he been in danger. The affair made a great noise. A lady belonging to a distinguished family wished to borrow of him quite a large sum; she was very pious and had dissipated her fortune by giving right and left, by bestowing enormous alms. Rostand, who knew that all her property was gone, had told her she must sign her brother's name to some notes; having those forgeries in his hand, he was certain of being paid by the brother, who would be interested in avoiding a scandal. The poor lady signed. Charity had ruined her, and the feeble goodness of her character made her succumb. The usurer had made no mistake in his calculation: the first notes were paid: but, as new obligations were being constantly presented, the brother lost patience and determined to look into the affair. He went to Rostand and threatened to prosecute him; he said he would rather see his sister disgraced than allow himself to be robbed with impunity by a thief like him. The usurer was almost frightened out of his wits; he surrendered the notes remaining in his possession. However, he did not lose a sou; he had loaned the money to the lady at a hundred per cent.

From that day Rostand was extremely prudent. He managed the funds of the scoundrelly band with a craftiness that won him the admiration and confidence of the capitalists. While the latter promenaded in the sunlight, like good people who rob nobody, he remained buried in a large gloomy office; it was there that the gold pieces of society shot up and bore fruit. Rostand had grown to passionately love his trade, his cheating and his robberies. Certain members of the band used their gains to satisfy their passions, their appetites for luxury and dissipation. His sole delight was in being a crafty knave, he took as much interest in each of his operations as in a poignant drama; he applauded when his sinister comedies succeeded, and then experienced self-satisfaction and the enjoyment of a triumphant author. afterwards he placed the stolen money on a table and sank into a miserly ecstasy.

Such was the man Revertegat had innocently pointed out to Marius as a man likely to loan him the funds he needed.

The following morning, the young man knocked at Rostand's door about eight o'clock. The house was heavy and square. All the blinds were closed, which gave the front a glacial bareness, an air of mystery and suspicion. An old and toothless woman servant, clad in a rag of dirty calico, partially opened the door.

'Is Monsieur Rostand in?' asked Marius.

'Yes, but he is engaged,' answered the servant, without further opening the door.

The impatient young man pushed her aside and entered the vestibule.

'Very well,' said he, 'I will wait.'

The surprised and hesitating servant realized that she could not get rid of such a determined intruder. She decided to take him into the second storey, where she left him in a sort of antechamber. The room was small and dark; the walls were covered with greenish paper which the dampess had discolored in large patches. The only piece of furniture was a straw-bottomed chair; Marius seated himself on it.

In front of him, an open door permitted him to see the interior of an office, in which a clerk was writing with a goose-quill pen, which scratched terribly on the paper. To the left of him was another door, which looked as if it led to the banker's private sanctum.

Marius waited a long while. Pungent odors of old paper lingered around him. The apartment was miserably filthy, and the bareness of the walls gave it a lugubrious aspect. Dust was heaped in the corners, and spiders were spinning their webs on the ceiling. The young man was almost stifled; the scratching of the goose-quill pen, which grew more and more noisy, made him nervous.

Suddenly he heard people talking in the adjoining room, and, as the words reached him clearly and distinctly, he was about to discreetly draw back his chair when certain phrases nailed him to his place. There are conversations to which one can listen; delicacy was not made to protect the privacy of certain men.

A sharp voice, which seemed to be that of the master of the house, said, with a friendly bluntness:

'Messieurs, we are all present; let us talk of serious things. The meeting is called to order. I will render a faithful account of my operations for the month, and we will then proceed to divide the profits.'

There was a slight tumult, a sound of individual conversations being brought to a close. Marius, who could not yet understand matters, nevertheless felt a lively curiosity take possession of him; he divined that a strange scene was in progress behind the door.

In truth, the usurer Rostand had assembled his worthy assoiates of the scoundrelly band. The young man had presented himself at the very hour of the meeting, at the moment the manager was about to exhibit his books, explain his operations and divide what had been cleared.

The sharp voice resumed:

'Before going into details, I must tell you that the results of this month have not been as satisfactory as those of last month. We cleared then, on average, sixty per cent, but now we have made only fifty-five.

Various exclamations broke forth. One might say that a displeased crowd was protesting in murmurs. There appear to be at least fifteen persons in the apartment.

'Messieurs,' continued Rostand, with a certain jeering bitterness, 'I have done all I could; you ought to thank me. The business grows more difficult daily. But here are my accounts; I will rapidly make you acquainted with some of the affairs I have transacted.'

A profound silence reigned for several seconds. Then arose a rustling of papers, the slight flapping of the leaves of a ledger. Marius' beginning to comprehend, listened with more attention than ever.

Then Rostand enumerated his operations, giving some explanations in regard to each. He had the noisy and nasal tone of a court tipstaff.

'I loaned,' said he, 'ten thousand francs to the young Comte de Salvy, a youth of twenty, who will be of age in nine months. He had lost at cards, and his lady-love, it seems, had exacted from him a large sum. I made him sign notes at ninety days for eighteen thousand francs. These notes are dated, as they should be, on the day the debtor will have attained his majority. The Salvys own large estates. It is an excellent affair.'

A fawning murmur greeted the usurer's words.

'The next day,' continued he, 'I received a visit from the Comte's lady-love; she was exasperated, the young man having given her only two or three thousand francs. She swore that she would bring de Salvy to me bound hand and foot, to obtain another loan. This time, I will demand the cession of a piece of property. We have still nine months to shear the young idiot, whom his mother leaves without money.'

Rostand turned the leaves of the ledger. He resumed, after a brief silence:

'Jourdier—a cloth merchant, who, each month, needs a few hundred francs to meet his obligations. To-day his stock belongs almost entirely to us. I have again loaned him five hundred francs at sixty per cent. Next month, if he asks me for a sou, I will make him fail and we will seize his merchandise.

'Marianne—a huckster. Every morning, she gets ten and returns me fifteen in the evening. I beleive she drinks. A small affair, but a sure profit—a fixed income of five francs per day.

'Laurent—a peasant of the Roquefavour district. He has ceded to me, strip by strip, a piece of land he owned near the Arc. This property is worth five thousand francs; it cost us two thousand. I have expelled our man from the premises. His wife and children came to me and wept over their poverty. You will give me credit for all such vexations, will you not?

Andre, a miller. He owed us eight hundred francs. I threatened him with a seizure. Then he hastened to beg me not to ruin him by making public his insolvency. I consented to make the seizure myself, without the aid of a bailiff and took more than twelve hundred francs' worth of furniture and linen; that is, I gained over four hundred francs by being humane.'

There was a little rustle of satisfaction in the assembly. Marius heard the half-suppressed laughter of those men, who were gloating over Mr. Rostand's shrewdness. The banker centinued:

'Now, we come to ordinary matters; three thousand francs loaned at forty per cent. to Simon, the merchant; fifteen hundred francs at fifty per cent, to the cattle merchant, Charancon; two thousand francs at eighty per cent. to the Marquis de Caffarel, a hundred francs at thirty-five per cent. to the son of the notary, Tingrey.'

And Rostand went on thus for a quarter of an hour reading out names and figures, enumerating loans which ranged from ten to ten thousand francs, and ates which varied from twenty to a hundred per cent. When he had finished, a hoarse, oily voice said:

'You must have been wrong in your statement a little while ago, my dear friend!' You have toiled marvellously this month. All these transactions are excellent. It is impossible for the profits not to average more than fifty-five per cent. You were surely deceived when you announced that figure.'

'I am never deceived,' answered the usurer coldly.

Marius, who had almost glued his ear to the door, thought he noticed indecision in the scoundrel's voice.

'I have not yet told you all,' continued Rostand, with embarrassment. 'A week ago, we lost twelve thousand francs!'

At these words there were terrible exclamations. Marius hoped for a moment that the wretches would strangle each other.

'The devil!' Listen to me!' cried the banker, amid the tumult. 'I make enough money for you to induce you to pardon me, when, by chance, I cause you to lose in a transaction. Besides, it was not my fault. I was robbed!'

He uttered these words with all the indignation of an honest man. When quiet was once more restored, he proceeded:

'This is the whole story: Monier, a grain merchant, a solvent man, of whom I had the most favorable information, asked me for twelve thousand francs. I replied that I could not lend them to him, but that I knew an old miser who would, perhaps' advance them at an exorbitant rate. He returned the next day and informed me that he was ready to accept all conditions. I called his attention to the fact that the miser demanded five thousand francs interest for six months. He consented. You see that it was an affair of gold. While I went to get the funds, he seated himself at my desk and signed seventeen notes for a thousand francs each. I glanced over the papers and placed them on the corner of this table. Then I chatted a few minutes with Monier, who had arisen; after having pocketed the money, he made his preparations to depart. When he had gone, I thought I would lock up his notes. I took the papers in my hand. Just think of it!—the knave had exchanged the notes for a similar package of derisory bills, smeared with ink, to the order of I know not whom, without signature. I was robbed. I nearly had a rush of blood to the head. I ran after the thief, who was tranquilly walking in the sun on the Cours. At the first word I addressed to him, he called me a usurer and threatened to drag me before the commissaire de police. This Monier has the reputation of being an upright and honest man, and, ma foi! I preferred to hold my tongue!'

This recital was frequently interrupted by the angry comments of the assembly.

'Admit, Rostand, that you showed a lack of energy,' said the hoarse voice. 'Well, we have lost our money, and will only get fifty-five per cent. Another time you must watch our interests closer. Now, let us divide.

Marius, despite his anguish and his indignation, could not repress a smile. The robbery committed by this Monier struck him as in the highest degree amusing, and, at the bottom of his heart, he applauded the knave who had duped another knave.

He knew now what was Rostand's business. He had not lost a word of what had been had been said in the adjoining room, and he had easily imagined the scene that had been going on there. Leaning slightly forward on his chair, his ear strained, he had seen with his mind's eye the usurers wrangling, with greedy looks and faces contracted by the evil passions which agitated them. Deep indignation had seized upon him at the recital of Rostand's rascalities; he had felt a desire to enter and strike the man.

He experienced a sort of bitter gaiety when remembering his errand in this den of cut-throats, What innocence, good God! It was here that he had hoped to find the fifteen thousand francs necessary to save Philippe, and he had waited for an hour that the banker might turn him into the street like a beggar. Or, perhaps Rostand would ask of him fifty per cent. and impudently rob him. At this thought, at the thought that on the other side of the door was a reunion of wretches who made money on the poverty and shame of a town, Marius suddenly arose and put his hand on the door-knob.

In the apartment was heard the sharp chink of gold pieces. The usurers were dividing their booty. Each was receiving the profit of a month's cheatery. This money they were counting, the music of which voluptuously tickled their flesh, gave forth at times the sound of sobs; one might say that the usurers' victims were lamenting.

Amid the echoing silence, the banker's voice uttered amounts with a metallic sharpness. He dealt out a share to each of his partners; he named a sum and let fall a pile of gold pieces, which struck the desk with a ringing sound.

Then Marius turned the door-knob. With pale face, and firm honest looks, he stood for several seconds on the threshold.

The young man had before him a strange spectacle. Rostand was standing in front of his desk; behind him was an open safe from which he took handfuls of gold. Around the desk, seated in an open circle, were the members of the scoundrelly band, some awaiting their share, others counting the money they had just received. Every minute the banker consulted his accounts, stooping over his ledger, letting the money go with the utmost prudence. His worthy partners were staring greedily at his hands.

At the sound of the door in opening every head turned with a sudden movement of terror and surprise. And when the usurers perceived Marius, grave and indignant, each instinctively placed his hand over his heap of gold. There was a moment of trouble and stupor.

The young man instantly recognized the wretches. He had met them in the streets, with heads held high, with countenances dignified and honest, and he had even bowed to some of them, who might have saved his brother. They all were rich, honored and influential; among them were former officials, property-holders, men who assiduously frequented the churches and the salons of the town. Marius, on seeing them thus, debased and contemptible, blanching, beneath his glances, made a gesture of disgust and disdain.

Rostand rushed towards the intruder. His eyes snapped excitedly; his wan lips trembled: all his reddish and wrinkled miser's mask expressed a sort of terrified astonishment.

'What do you want?' asked he of Marius hesitatingly. 'It is not customary to enter houses in this way.

'I wanted fifteen thousand francs,' answered the young man in a cold and jeering tone.

'I have no money,' the usurer hastened to reply, moving towards his safe.

'Oh! rest easy; I have abandoned the idea of being robbed. For an hour past I have been behind that door and have heard all the details of your meeting.

This declaration fell like the blow of a club, and made all the members of the scoundrelly band turn away their heads. These men yet possessed the shame belonging to their honorable station; some of them hid their faces in their hands. Rostand, who had no reputation to lose, recovered himself little by little. He approached Marius and cried, in a loud voice:

"Who are you? By what right do you steal into my house to listen at the doors? Why do you make your way into my private office, if you have nothing to ask of me?'

'Who am I?' said Marius, in a low calm tone. 'I am an honest man and you are a knave! By what right have I listened at that door? By the right that people of probity have to unmask and crush scoundrels! Why have I made my way to you? To tell you that you are a wretch and to amply satisfy my indignation!'

Rostand trembled with rage. He did not seek to explain to himself the presence of this avenger, who hurled truths in his face. He was about to cry aloud and fling himself upon Marius, when the latter stopped him with an energetic gesture.

'Be quiet!' thundered he. 'I am on the point of going: I am sufficating here. But I did not wish to withdraw without revealing myself a little. Ah! Messieurs you have a furious appetite. You share among you the tears and despair of families with a terrible gluttony; you gorge yourselves with robberies and rascalities! I am glad to be able to disturb your digestion a trifle, and make you shiver with uneasiness to the depths of your cowardly hearts!'

Rostand strove to interrupt him. He continued in a more resonant voice:

'Highway robbers have, at least, the merit of courage. They fight, they risk their lives! But you, Messieurs, steal disgracefully in the darkness, you slink ignobly in the by-ways of a contemptible vocation! And, worst of all, you can live without being knaves! You all are rich! You commit villiany, God save the mark! for amusement and the gratification of your tastes!

Some of the usurers arose menacingly.

'You have never seen the anger of an honest man, have you?' added Marius jeeringly. 'The truth irritates and frightens you. You are accustomed to be treated with the consideration due to an upright people, and, as you have so arranged matters as to hide your infamies and preserve everybody's esteem, you have at last grown to believe in the respect accorded to you hypocrisy! Well, I desired that once in your lives you might be insulted as you deserve, and that is why I came in here!'

The young man saw that he would be murdered if he remained. He retired step by step towards the door, holding the usurers in check with his glance. At the door he paused again.

'I am well aware, Messieurs,' said he, 'that I cannot drag you before human justice. Your wealth, your influence and your shrewdness render you inviolable. If I were stupid enough to struggle against you, I certainly would be the party punished. But, at least, I will not have to reproach myself with having been in the presence of men such as you, without casting my contempt in their faces. Would that my words were a red-hot iron to brand your foreheads with infamy. The crowd in that case would follow you and hoot at you, and then, perhaps, you would profit by the lesson. Divide your gold; if you have the least bit of probity left, it will burn your hands!

Marius closed the door and departed. When he was in the street, he smiled sadly. He saw life stretch out before him, with all its shame and misery, and said to himself that he was filling in existence the noble and ridculous role of a Done Quixote of justice and honor.

He thought that, perhaps, it would have been better had he not entered Rostand's office. He had grown indignant to no purpose whatever; he knew that he would correct no one. But, when indignation urged him on, he altogether lost control of himself; he had attacked the usurers through instinct, as any man would crush base and dangerous reptiles.

CHAPTER XVII.

TWO INFAMOUS SCOUNDRELS.

When Marius related his adventure to the jailer and the flower-girl, the latter exclaimed:

'We have not advanced a step! Why did you get angry? That man, perhaps, would have loaned you the money."

Young girls have infatuations which give them a certain pliancy of conscience; thus Fine, altogether upright as she was would, doubtless, have turned a deaf ear to Rostand's rascalities, and, on occasion, would even have made use of the secrets chance had confided to her.

To be continued.

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