POOR DOCUMENT

THE FLOWER GIRLS

—OF—

Marseilles!

(Continued.)

Around Marius, the crowd cried out that injustice had been done; the masses with one voice protested against the atrocity of the punishment.

And as the young man, angry and hopeless, talked excitedly with the lawyer, a soft hand was placed upon his arm. He turned quickly and saw Fine beside him, calm and smiling.

'Hope and follow me,' said she to him, in a low voice. 'Your brother is saved!'

CHAPTER XII.

FINE'S STRATEGY.

While Marius, before the trial, was fruitlessly scouring the town, Fine, on her side, was toiling away at the work of deliverance. She had undertaken a systematic campaign against the conscience of her uncle, the jailer Revertegat.

She had installed herself at his house; she spent the days in the prison. She sought from morning till night to make herself useful, to cause herself to be adored by her relative, who lived alone, like a growling bear with his two little daughters. She attacked him through his paternal love; she charmingly cajoled the children; she expended all her savings for playthings, sugar plums and toilet geegaws. The little ones were not in the habit of being indulged; they acquired a noisy tenderness for their big cousin who danced them on her knees and distributed such handsome and good things. The father was touched; he thanked Fine effusively.

Despite himself, he yielded to the penetrating influence of the young girl. He grumbled when it was necessary for him to leave the room in which she was. The flower-girl seemed to have brought with her the sweet odor of her flowers, the freshness of her roses and violets. The jailer's lodge had been delightfully perfumed from the moment of her arrival, when she tripped into it, gay and sprightly; her bright skirts appeared to scatter there light, air and gayety. Everything smiled now in the gloomy apartment, and Revertegat said with a hearty laugh, that spring had come to live with him. The good man forgot himself amid the caressing effluvia of that spring; his heart softened and, little, by little, he laid aside the roughness and severity incident to his vocation.

Fine was too shrewd a girl not to play her role with sly prudence. She did nothing hastily; step by step, she led him to pity and lenity. Then she expressed compassion for Philippe in his presence; she forced him to declare with his own lips that the young man was unjustly kept in prison. When she held Revertegat in her hands, supple and submissive, she asked him if she could not visit the cell of the poor fellow. The jailer dare not say no; he took his niece to the spot, allowed her to enter and remained at the door to keep watch.

Fine stood like a simpleton before Philippe. She stared at him, confused and blushing, oblivious of what she wished to say. The young man recognized her and quickly approached her, with a tender and charmed air.

'You here, my dear child!' cried he. 'Ah! how kind of you to come and see me. Will you allow me to kiss your hand?'

Surely, Philippe thought himself in his little apartment on the Rue Sainte, and, perhaps, he was not far from dreaming of a new adventure. The flower girl, surprised almost wounded, withdrew her hand and gravely looked at Blanche's lover.

'You are out of your senses, Monsieur Philippe,' answered she. 'You know well enough that, in my eyes, you are now married. Let us speak of serious things.'

She lowered her voice and continued, rapidly:

'The jailer is my uncle, and, for over a week, I have been working for your deliverance. I wished to see you to tell you that your friends have not forgotten you. Hope!'

Philippe, on hearing these welcome words, regretted his gallant reception of his visitor.

'Give me your hand,' said he, in an agitated voice. 'I ask it as a friend, who wishes to grasp it like an old comrade. Do you pardon me?'

The flower girl smiled, without answering his question.

'I think,' resumed she, 'that I can soon throw the door wide open for you. When will you make your escape?'

'Make my escape! But I shall be acquitted. What is the use of flight! If I escaped, I should declare by that very action that I am guilty!'

Fine had not thought of that. In her view, Philippe was convicted in advance; but, all things considered, he was right; they should wait until after the trial. As she maintained silence, pensive and irresolute, Revertegat gave two little knocks upon the door to ask her to quit the cell.

'Well,' continued she, addressing the prisoner, 'hold yourself in readiness. If you are convicted, your brother and I will arrange your flight. Have confidence.'

She withdrew, leaving Philippe almost in love with her. Now she had time before her in which to win over her uncle. She continued to pursue her strategy, amazing the dear man by her kindness and her grace, exciting his pity in regard to the prisoner's lot. She brought into the conspiracy her two little cousins, who, at a word from her, would have quitted their father to follow her. One evening, after having softened Revertegat by all the cajoleries she could invent, she at last asked him squarely for Philippe's freedom.

'Pardieu!' cried the jailer, 'if the matter rested only with me, I would at once open the door for him!'

'But it does rest only with you, uncle!' answered Fine, frankly.

'Ah! you think so, do you? If I allowed him to escape, I should lose my place tomorrow and die of hunger with my two daughters.

These words made the flower-girl serious.

'But,' resumed she, an instant afterwards, 'what if I gave you money, if I loved this young man and if I begged you with clasped hands to give him up to me?'

'You! you!' cried the jailer in astonishment.

He had arisen; he stared at his niece to make sure that she was in earnest.

When he saw her grave and moved, he bowed his head, conquered, softened, consenting with a gesture.

'Ma foi!' said he, 'in that case, I would do as you wished. You are too good and too pretty a girl to be refused!'

Fine embraced him and spoke of something. Now, she was certain of victory. At various times, she resumed the conversation; she accustomed Revertegat to the idea of allowing Philippe to escape. She did not wish to bring her relative to want, and, at first offered him a recompense of fifteen thousand francs. This offer dazzled the jailer; from that instant he surrendered himself to her, bound hand and foot.

And this was why Fine had been able to say to Marius, with her cunning smile: 'Follow me. Your brother is saved!'

She took the young man to the prison. On the way, she related to him all the details of her campaign; she told him how, little by little, she had won over her uncle. Marius' upright soul at first revolted at the recital of this comedy; it was repugnant to him to think that his brother would owe his safety to flight, to the purchase of a conscience. The idea of duty was so deeply rooted in him that he felt a certain shame at the proposal to pay Revertegat to betray the trust that had been reposed in him. Then he thought of the intrigues employed by M. de Cazalis; he said to himself that, after all, he would only be using the same weapons as his adversaries, and he grew calm.

He thanked Fine in a touching way; he knew not how to show her his gratitude. The young girl, happy in her excited joy, scarcely heard his protestations of indebtedness.

They could not see Revertegat until evening. The jailer, at the first words of the conversation, showed Marius his two little daughters, who were playing in a corner of the room.

'Monsieur,' he simply said, 'there is my excuse. I would not ask for a sou, if I had not those children to keep.'

This scene was painful to Marius. He shortened it as much as possible. He knew that the jailer yielded at once to interest and devotedness, and, if he could not despise him, he felt ill at ease in making such a bargain with him.

However, all was settled in a few minutes. Marius stated that he would depart the following morning for Marseilles, and that he would bring back with him the fifteen thousand francs promised by Fine. He counted upon drawing them from his banker; his mother had left fifty thousand francs which were deposited with M. Berad, whose house was one of the strongest and best known in the city. It was decided that the flower-girl should remain at Aix, and there await the young man's return.

He departed, full of hope, already seeing him free. As he quitted the diligence at Marseilles, he received unexpected and terrible news which crushed him. The banker Berard had just failed.

CHAPTER XIII.

A SCOUNDRELLY BANKRUPT.

Marius hastened to the bankers office. He could not believe the sinister news, for he had the faith of honest hearts. On the way, he said to himself that the rumors which were in circulation were, perhaps, only calumnies, and he cherished wild hopes. The loss of his fortune at this moment was the loss of his brother, it seemed to him that chances could not be so cruel to him; the public must be deceived; Berard would pay him his money. He must see with his own eyes to be convinced.

When he entered the banking-house, cold anguish seized upon his heart. He saw the terrible reality. The rooms were vacant; the vast apartments, deserted and still, with their closed gratings and their bare desks, appeared funeral to him. A fortune which crumbles away leaves a sad desolation behind it. A vague odor of ruin escaped from the pasteboard boxes, from the papers and from the safe. Seals spread everywhere their white bands and their huge bits of red wax.

Marius passed through three rooms without finding any one. He at last discovered a clerk, who had come to take from a desk some articles belonging to him. This clerk told him in a rough tone that M. Berard was in his office.

The young man entered, trembling, forgetting to shut the door. He perceived the banker, who was tranquilly at work writing letters, arranging papers and adjusting accounts. This man, still young tall, with a handsome and intelligent face, was dressed with exquisite taste; he wore rings on his fingers; he had a polite and rich air. He looked as if freshly arrayed to receive his customers and personally explain to them his disaster.

Besides, his attitude seemed courageous. He was a resigned victim of circumstances, or, rather an arrant scoundrel who would get out of a scrape by dint of audacity.

On seeing Marius enter, he assumed an air of compunction; he looked his customer squarely in the face, and his countenance expressed a sort of honest sorrow.

'I expected you, my dear Monsieur,' said he, in an agitated voice. 'You see that I am waiting for all those whose ruin I have caused. I will have courage to the end; I wish everyone to see that I have nothing to be ashamed of.'

He placed a ledger on his desk and opened it with a certain affectation.

'Here are my accounts,' continued he. 'My obligations foot up a million and my assets a million, five hundred francs. The court will arrange matters, and I hope my creditors will not suffer too heavy a loss. I am the first to feel the blow; I have lost my fortune and my credit; I have allowed myself to be outrageously robbed by insolvent debtors.

Marius had not uttered a word. In the presence of Berard's dejected calmness, in the presence of this mise-en scene of austere grief, he could not find in his heart a single cry of reproach, a single indignant and furious syllable. He almost pitied this man who thus faced the storm.

'Monsieur,' said he, at length, 'why did you not notify me when you saw your affairs becoming entangled and going wrong? My mother was a friend of your mother, and, in remembrance of our old relations, you should have caused me to withdraw from the house the money you were about to involve. Your ruin to day strips me of everything and plunges me in despair.'

Berard advanced hurriedly and seized Marius' hands.

'Do not say that!' cried he; in a piteous tone; 'do not overwhelm me! Ah! you little know what cruel regrets are rending me! When I saw the gulf, I strove to cling to the tree branches; I struggled, until the last moment, I hoped to save the amounts deposited with me. You cannot imagine what terrible risks those who handle money run?'

Marius was speechless. What could he say to this man who excused himself by heaping accusations upon his own head? He had no proofs; he dare not call Berard a swindle; his only course was to retire quietly. Besides, the banker spoke in a voice so woeful, in a fashion so touching and so frank, that he almost felt compassion for him. He hastened to withdraw in order to leave him in peace. His misfortune oppressed him.

As he was returning through the empty rooms, the clerk, who had finished his preparations for the removal of his effects, took up his bundle and hat and followed him. This clerk sneered between his teeth, and, at each step, stared at Marius with a strange air, shrugging his shoulders. Outside, on the pavement, he suddenly addressed him:

'Well,' said he, 'what do you think of the Sieur Berard? He is a capital actor, is he not? The office door was left open; I laughed heartily to see his disconsolate looks. He nearly wept, the honest man. Allow me to tell you, Monsieur, that you have permitted yourself to be duped in the most polite fashion!'

'I do not understand you,' answered Marius.

'So much the better; that proves you to be an upright and just man. As for me, I quit this swindling shop with profound joy. For a long time I suspected what was going to happen; I foresaw the denouement of this high comedy of robbery. I have a remarkably keen scent for discovering intrgues in a house.'

'Explain yourself.'

'Oh! the story is a simple one. I can relate it to you in a few words: Ten years ago Berard opened a banking-house. To-day, I doubt not that from the first he was preparing for a failure. This is the way he reasoned: "I wish to be rich because I have strong appetites, I desire to get rich as soon as possible because I am eager to satisfy my appetites. Now, the straight road is rough and long; I prefer to follow the by-ways of trickery and gather up my millions in ten years. I will become a banker; I will have a safe as a trap for the funds of the public. Each year, I will steal a round sum. This can go on as long as necessary; I will stop when my pockets are full. Then, I willl calmly suspend payment. Of two millions, which shall have been confided to me, I will generously restore two or or three hundred francs to my creditors The rest, hidden in a little corner I know of, will help me live as I desire, in idleness and pleasure!" Now, do you understand, my dear Monsieur?'

Marius heard the clerk with stupefaction.

'But,' said he, 'what you tell me is impossible. Berard this instant informed me that his obligations foot up a million and his assets a million, five hundred thousand francs! We shall all be repaid in full: it is merely a matter of patience.'

The clerk gave vent to a torrent of laughter.

'Ah! mon Dieu! how innocent you are!' resumed he. 'Do you really believe in those assets of a million, five hundred thousand francs? In the first place, they will deduct Madame Berard's dowry from that sum. Now Madame Berard brought fifty thousand francs to her husband, which the latter has transformed, in the marriage contract, into five hundred thousand francs. As you see it was a little steal of four hundred and fifty thousand francs. A million remains, and that million is almost entirely represented by worthless notes. The process of getting such notes is exceedingly simple. There are, in Marseilles, people, who for a hundred sous, sell their signatures: this easy and lucrative trade brings them in a good living. Berard has had a pile of notes signed by these men of straw, and has pocketed the money which he claims to-day to have loaned insolvent debtors. If you get a dividend of ten per cent, you may consider yourself fortunate. And that in eighteen months or two years, when the bankruptcy official shall have finished his labors.'

Marius was crushed. Thus the fifty thousand francs, left him by his mother, would dwindle to a ridiculous sum, of no use whatever to him. He must have money immediately, and he was told he must wait two years. And his ruin and despair were the work of a scoundrel who had just made a fool of him. Anger took possession of him.

'This Berard is a rascal,' said he, indignantly. 'He will be vigorously pursued. We should rid society of these crafy men who enrich themselves by the ruin of others. The jail awaits them.'

Again the clerk indulged in a burst of laughter.

'Berard,' answered he, 'will, perhaps, be sent to prison for a couple of weeks. That's all. You are once more failing to comprehend me! Listen.'

The two young men had remained standing upon the sidewalk. The passers pushed against them. They returned to the vestibule of the banking-house.

'You say the jail awaits Berard,' continued the clerk. The jail awaits only awkward people. During the ten years he has been maturing and caressing his failure, our man has taken his precautions; such infamy as his is a work of art. His accounts are correct, and he has put the law on his side. He knows in advance the slight risk he runs. The court can at most reproach him with too heavy personal expenses; he will be accused, besides, of having put in circulation a large number of promissory notes, a ruinous method of procuring money. But these faults entail only a derisory punishment. As I have already told you, Berard will be sent to prison for two weeks or a month at most.'

'But,' exclaimed Marius, 'cannot we proclaim this man's crime in the open street, prove his infamy and cause his conviction?'

'No, that cannot be done! There are no proofs, I tell you. Besides Berard has not lost no time; he has forseen everything; he has made powerful friends in Marseilles, thinking that he would, doubtless, some day need their influence. Now, in this city of clubs, he is a sort of inviolable personage; if one should touch a single hair of his head, all his friends would cry out with grief and rage. He can'at the utmost, be imprisoned a brief period for form's sake. When he is at liberty, he will unearth his little million, display his luxury and easily create for himself a new esteem. Then you will meet him in his carriage, reclining upon cushions, and the wheels of his caleche will splash mud over you; you will see him, indifferent an idle, keeping an expensive house and enjoying all the pleasures of existence. And, to worthily crown his success as a robber, people will bow to him, love him and open for him a new credit of honor and consideration.'

Marius kept a ferocious silence. The clerk made him a slight bow and said, as he was about depart:

'It is thus that the farce is played. I had all this on my heart, and am glad I met you and relieved myself. Now, a word of good advice: Keep secret what I have just told you, bid adieu to your money and do not bother yourself any further about this wretched affair. Reflect, and you will see that I am right. Farewell.'

Marius was alone A furious desire seized upon him to return to Berard's office and slap him in the face. All his instincts of justice and probity revolted and urged him to drag the banker into the street, proclaiming his crime. Then disgust succeeded his fury; he thought of his poor mother, shamefully cheated by this man, and from that instant felt only a crushing contempt for him. He followed the clerk's advice; he strode away from the banking-house, striving to forget that he had money and that a thief had stolen it from him.

To be continued.

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