

THE FLOWER GIRLS

Marseilles!

(Continued.)

Marius, in spite of himself, had approached the group formed by the young girls and the abbé. The street, silent and solitary, lay white beneath the glowing sun of noon; slight tufts of grass surrounded the shining paving stones, and a single lean dog slunk along in the narrow thread of shade which skirted the house.

When the young men heard the Abbé Chastanier's words, he advanced with a sudden movement and grasped his hands effusively.

"Ah! father," said he, in a trembling voice, "you restore me hope and faith. Since yesterday, I have doubted God! How shall I thank you, how prove to you my gratitude! Now I feel invincible courage and am certain of saving my brother!"

Blanche, at the sight of Marius, bowed her head. A burning blush mounted to her cheeks. She stood, confused and embarrassed, suffering horribly from the presence of Philippe's brother, who knew her to be a perjurer and whom her uncle and she had plunged in despair. The young man, when his joy had grown somewhat calm, regretted that he had approached. The doleful attitude of Mlle. de Cazalis filled him with pity.

"My brother has been shamefully guilty, said he to her, at last. But pardon him as I pardon you!"

He could find only those words. He would have liked to speak to her of her child, question her as to the lot in reserve for that poor little being, claim it of her in Philippe's name. But he dared not torture her further.

Without doubt, Fine had comprehended his thoughts. While he walked a few steps with the Abbé Chastanier, she said to Blanche, in a hurried voice:

"Bear in mind that I have offered to be a mother to your child. Now, I love you; I see that you have a stout heart. Make a sign, and I will fly to your aid. Besides, I will watch; I do not wish the poor little creature to suffer from the folly of its parents."

Blanche silently grasped the flower-girl's hand. That was her sole response. Huge tears ran down her cheeks.

Mlle. de Cazalis and the Abbé Chastanier set out immediately for Marseilles. Fine and Marius hastened to the prison. They informed Revertegat that they had four months in which to prepare for the escape, and the jailer swore to them that he would keep this word, no matter on what day or at what hour they should summon him to do so.

Before quitting Aix, the two young people wished to see Philippe, in order to tell him of what had taken place and bid him hope. That night, at eleven o'clock, Revertegat again took them to the cell. Philippe, who was becoming accustomed to prison life, did not seem to them very greatly dejected.

"Provided that you save me from the ignominy of the public exposure," said he to them, "I will consent to everything. I would rather break my head against a wall than be fastened to the infamous pillory!"

Finally, the next day, the diligence bore Marius and Fine back to Marseilles. They were about to continue the struggle on a larger scale. They were about to search the depths of human consciences and see exposed the vices of a great city, given up to all the disorders of modern industry.

CHAPTER XX.

POLITICS AND JUSTICE.

Meanwhile, political complications had arisen in Marseilles. The liberals had of late received numerous accessions and felt their power. They were thoroughly dissatisfied with the course of M. de Cazalis as a deputy, and his pride and arrogant conduct as an individual utterly disgusted them. Besides, his merciless persecution of Philippe Cayol, whom they recognized as one of their chiefs, filled them with rage, especially as they knew that in disgracing him the deputy was striking the party and taking revenge for having been compelled in the past to pay court to the republicans.

Another election was approaching, and the opposition loudly declared that M. de Cazalis, who was again a candidate, should not be re-elected deputy. The canvass promised to be unusually bitter and exciting; the adherents of Philippe Cayol were everywhere firing the populace and urging that an overwhelming demonstration against M. de Cazalis be made by the masses. In fact, the injustice done to Philippe gave signs of being an important issue in the campaign.

Such was the commotion that the government, becoming alarmed, had summoned M. de Cazalis to Paris to confer with him respecting the threatening state of affairs.

Marius and Fine returned to Marseilles when the excitement was at its height. The young man was everywhere received by the liberals with enthusiasm which showed plainly that he had suddenly become a person of importance. The masses cheered him in the streets, and wherever he went crowds of girls of the people waved their handkerchiefs in his honor.

Fine was proud of Marius' vast popularity; she neglected no opportunity of adding fuel to the flames by telling the women what a noble fellow he was, and how he had unselfishly devoted himself to the cause of his brother, the victim of aristocratic tyranny.

Marius had not yet decided what steps to take for furthering the object nearest his heart—the rising of the fifteen thousand francs to secure Philippe's liberation—when, early morning, there was a sharp knock at the door of his apartment in the Rue Sainte.

The young man opened the door; he was filled with amazement to find that his visitor was M. de Gironse.

"You are astonished to see me here, are you not?" said the comte, in his usual abrupt fashion. "Well, you will be still more astonished when you learn my errand!"

M. de Gironse entered the room and took the chair Marius offered him. His eyes sparkled strangely as he resumed:

"It is in your power to do a little towards bringing the proud and stolid nobles to their senses; at the same time you can save your brother!"

Marius stared at him in stupefaction. The comte continued:

"Do you not know that to-day you are the most popular man in all Marseilles, as M. de Cazalis is the most unpopular? Have you not noticed that the liberals are in the ascendant, that they will surely carry the approaching election? There is your opportunity!"

"I do not understand you," stammered the young man.

"Are you blind?" cried the comte, rising and impatiently pacing the apartment. "The liberals are organized and powerful; they have able leaders; all they need is a suitable and popular candidate. You are that man!"

M. de Gironse stopped in front of Marius and looked him straight in the face.

The young man was astounded. The idea of taking advantage of the political commotion and his personal popularity to oust the deputy from power had never entered his brain.

"But I am no politician," said he; "I am unknown to the leaders of the republicans. Besides, I have not the money to cope with M. de Cazalis in the campaign."

"You are unknown to the leaders of the republicans," cried M. de Gironse. "Not a bit of it! You are known to all of them; the advisability of your nomination is even at this moment being discussed. As to money, I will aid you to raise all you may. I came to Marseilles to tell you this, and also to urge you, if only for your brother's sake, to accept the nomination which will certainly be tendered to you."

Marius put his hands to his head in bewilderment. He thought he was dreaming. But a short time before he had been powerless, and M. de Cazalis had towered above him like a giant; now, he was informed that he could humble the arrogant deputy, and that he might speedily have sufficient influence to save Philippe. The comte interrupted his reverie by saying:

"Will you accept the nomination I have spoken of?"

"To help my brother—yes!" replied Marius, with determination.

M. de Gironse then departed, first giving the young man his address in Marseilles, and exacting from him a promise to come to him at once should anything having a political significance occur.

The comte had hardly gone when Fine made her appearance, out of breath and flushed with excitement.

"Do you know what has happened, Marius?" asked she, as soon as she could find words. "No; you could never guess! They say in the streets that the liberals have named you as their candidate for deputy against Blanche's uncle!"

Marius' eyes flashed. Vengeance was, indeed, within his grasp, if nothing more.

"M. de Gironse was here just before you came," said he. "He informed me that my nomination was probable; he also urged me to accept, offered me money to carry on the canvass, and said that my election meant Philippe's safety!"

Fine clasped her hands joyously.

"You will accept?" said she.

"I will!"

During the day, Marius was officially notified of his nomination and accepted. He had grave misgivings as to the step he was taking, out the thought of his brother's nerved and sustained him.

The young man at once sought out M. de Gironse and told him the news. The comte grasped him cordially by the hand, assuring him that his success was now only a matter of time.

On both sides, the campaign was pushed with extreme vigor. The nobles and some of the priests rallied about M. de Cazalis; but a powerful faction of the clergy, headed by the wily Abbé Donadei, joined the liberal forces. The shrewd Italian had scented the coming storm; with his natural quickness, he was to which side victory inclined and threw all his weight into the winning scale. M. de Cazalis put in circulation all sorts of slanders in regard to Marius; he was a scoundrel and a reprobate, the terror of honest families, and deserved to be in prison with his infamous brother; if he had his deserts, he would be pilloried with him. The unscrupulous deputy gave the names of people he had ruined, of others whose peace of mind he had forever destroyed. The liberals retorted by asserting that M. de Cazalis had forced his niece to commit perjury, to turn against the man she loved; that he had deliberately and in cold blood concocted the outrageous plot to disgrace Philippe Cayol; that he was a wretch and a knave; that he had made capital out of Blanche's flight with which to crush the people in the person of an innocent man, and that he ought to be punished for his crimes instead of being re-elected deputy.

Marius through all this maintained a calm dignity, acting on advice given him by M. de Gironse. But Fine could not be controlled; she was constantly in a fever of excitement, and her enthusiasm for the candidate of the liberals knew no bounds; the indignation she felt at the vile slanders current in regard to Marius fell little short of absolute fury; could she have come in contact with M. de Cazalis, she would have done her best to strangle him.

M. de Gironse did not openly take part in the campaign, but he moved a host of secret strings, making it his business to counteract all the shrewd trickery resorted to by M. de Cazalis and his adherents. Whenever it was known that votes had been purchased for the deputy, the comte promptly furnished money to buy an equal number for Marius. He remained quietly in Marseilles, keeping his eyes and ears wide open.

At length, the election took place, and Marius was triumphantly chosen deputy. M. de Cazalis sustaining an overwhelming defeat.

The first use the new deputy made of his power was to cause Philippe's case to be reopened by the Cour d'Assises at Aix.

Blanche again appeared as a witness. She had escaped from her uncle's control, and for some time past had remained in concealment at the house of the Abbé Chastanier's infirm sister in Marseilles. Fine being constantly with her and ministering to all her needs like a sister. The poor child stood up in the court room, pale and trembling, supported on one side by the old priest, and on the other by the faithful flower-girl. In an almost inaudible voice she told the story of her flight with Philippe, declaring that she had voluntarily followed the young man because she loved him; that she had married him and had always considered herself his wife, and that her statement at the former trial had been dictated to her by her iron-willed uncle, whom she had not had the strength of mind to resist.

The vast audience present received her testimony with murmurs of applause which were promptly suppressed by the court officials.

Philippe sat in his place, his countenance radiant with joy and hope. On hearing Blanche's evidence he felt that he loved the young girl more than ever.

The Lambesc in-keeper repeated that while at his house Mlle. de Cazalis had called Philippe her husband, and Marguerite, the milkmaid, deposed that she now perfectly remembered having carried letters from Mlle. Blanche to her lover.

Marius detailed all that had occurred during his interview with his brother and the young girl at the house of the gardener Ayasse at Saint-Barnabe; he spoke in a firm, manly tone which carried conviction with it.

The result was the acquittal of Philippe Cayol, and the arrest of M. de Cazalis on the charge of conspiracy to ruin the young man. The gardener Ayasse was released from prison by order of the President.

In due course, Philippe was set at liberty. Marius was waiting to receive him, in company with Fine and the Abbé Chastanier. As the jailer Revertegat delivered his prisoner to them, Marius slipped a packet into his hand.

"Take it," said he; "it contains the fifteen thousand francs promised you. I am happy to give you the sum with the knowledge that you have earned it solely by your kindness and that it is not the price of a criminal act!"

It should be stated here that, immediately after Marius' election, the banker Berard, becoming frightened, had restored to him the fifty thousand francs left by his mother.

Revertegat took the money and silently walked away, but a suspicious moisture in his eyes told that his heart was touched.

Philippe grasped his brother's hand effusively.

"How can I thank you!" he said.

"By making reparation to the young girl you have wronged," answered Marius, sternly.

"But will she accept me as her husband after all my baseness?" asked Philippe, greatly agitated.

Fine came forward and Philippe, with a sudden return of his old inclinations, moved as if to kiss her on the cheek.

"No!" said she, repulsing him with an air of sorrow and regret. "In the sight of God, you are the husband of another. You ask if Mlle. Blanche will accept you. I reply that she will!"

The Abbé Chastanier interposed.

"My Son," said he, "I have just quitted Mlle. de Cazalis. Rest assured that she will do everything required of her by the laws of God and human justice."

Philippe looked joyously around him.

"And I, too, will do everything required of me by the laws of God and human justice!" said he, firmly. "But will M. de Cazalis proud and haughty as he is, sanction our union?"

"As matters now stand," replied the old priest, "the law will permit us to dispense with his consent."

CHAPTER XXI.

REPARATION AND REWARD.

The interview between Blanche and Philippe was embarrassing. The young girl scarcely lifted her eyes from the floor when her lover came into her presence; he stood for a moment gazing sorrowfully into her pale and averted face.

"Blanche," said he, at last—"my wife!" He took her hand and softly caressed it.

Courage returned to the young girl; she raised her eyes and gazed tenderly at her lover, but still not a syllable came from her lips, which seemed dry and parched.

"Blanche," continued Philippe, "give me a word of comfort and hope; tell me that you will be mine; tell me that you will consent to have our already pronounced nuptial vows renewed before the Mayor and the church!"

The poor girl blushed scarlet and trembled from head to foot, but her lips remained sealed.

"Blanche! Blanche!" cried the young man in despair, "is all the love you once felt for me cold and dead in your bosom? You are suffering, child, speak!"

Blanche shuddered.

"Do not recall our old love, Philippe," said she, in a voice quivering with agony; "it was unblest and unholy! I was a rash, inexperienced girl, and did not know what I was doing."

"So be it," answered Philippe, solemnly, "let our old love perish; but, from my ashes, may not a newer and purer love arise—a love the law will authorize and the church sanctify?—the love which unites two hearts and makes them beat with a single throb!"

"Yes," murmured she, "such a love might arise; but I am unworthy of it. I have betrayed you—I have cast you into prison."

"But you have also delivered me; you were unjust only because your proud and revengeful uncle compelled you to do so."

When you were free to act as you thought, you hastened to my relief; to repair the injury you had inflicted on me. I have long since forgiven you, and now I ask you to forgive me."

Philippe spoke with life and earnestness. Blanche was deeply moved.

"I, too, forgave you long ago," she replied, in an agitated voice.

"Then love me now and be my wife," said Philippe, eagerly, "think of the pure happiness of wedlock; think that our child will be legitimized."

Mlle. de Cazalis burst into tears. Philippe caught her in his arms; he impressed a burning kiss upon her lips.

"Do not refuse me," he pleaded, "I am sincere—I will make amends for all the bitter past."

The young girl did not seek to free herself; she remained passively in her lover's arms; but she sobbed as if her heart would break.

"Do you consent to be my wife?" continued Philippe; "do you consent to give me an opportunity to prove that I really love you for yourself alone?"

"Yes," murmured Blanche, "for now I know that you speak the truth!"

At that moment there was a discreet knock at the door, and an instant afterwards the Abbé Chastanier entered the apartment. He saw at a glance how matters stood, and a calm smile lighted up his face.

"My children," he said, "I have brought with me a person who ardently desires to see you, that he may in some measure atone for the misery he has caused you. Shall he come in?"

Blanche and Philippe, in surprise, nodded consent. Their surprise deepened to amazement when the priest, going to the door, ushered in M. de Cazalis in the custody of two court officers. The ex-deputy was humbled and penitent. Blanche ran to him. He took her hands in his and said, in a voice entirely stripped of its usual haughtiness:

"My child, I come to do you tardy justice. I feel that you can never pardon me for all the evil I have done, but shall strive, at least, to deserve a kind thought from you."

Turning to Philippe, he added:

"You shall soon have your revenge, for I shall be convicted and sent to prison, but, before that supreme disgrace prostrates me in the dust, let me say that I withdraw all obstacles to your union with my niece; nay, that I freely consent to that union."

He turned and left the room with the officers. Blanche and Philippe tried in vain to stop him.

"Let him go," said the Abbé Chastanier; "he has repented and made amends. God will blot out his crime!"

A few evenings after this scene, Marius went to Fine's dwelling on the Place aux Eufs in Marseilles. He was evidently a prey to some strong excitement which he did his best to conceal.

At the door, he met the flower-girl's brother Cadet.

"Cadet," said he, in a rather tremulous voice which he strove to render firm, "is your sister within?"

"Yes," replied the young fellow; "but she is terribly dejected. I think that Monsieur Philippe's approaching marriage with Mlle. de Cazalis has something to do with it," he added, archly.

"Poor girl!" said Marius. "I know she loved him."

He found Fine busily engaged with her bouquets for the following day; but she went about her work mechanically, and, as her brother had said, she was terribly dejected.

The young deputy spoke some comforting words to her, but his excitement betrayed itself to such an extent that his companion at last noticed it and said:

"What is the matter with you, tonight? Has anything gone wrong?"

"No," replied he; "everything is entirely satisfactory, but the fact is, I have something important to say to you."

"To me?"

"Yes."

"What can it be?" cried Fine, throwing back her head with a remnant of her old coquettishness.

"Only this: I wish to ask you to be Madame Marius Cayol!"

Fine dropped her bouquets, and said with a hollow laugh:

"Oh, no! That would never do! The honor is too great! A fine figure, indeed. I would cut as a deputy's wife! Besides, my heart is dead!"

"I know you loved Philippe," rejoined Marius; "but as it is impossible for him to marry two wives, why cannot you make his ugly brother happy? You are as worthy to be a deputy's wife as I am to be a deputy!"

"But you never told me you loved me before to-night!"

"I have loved you for a long while, nevertheless; in fact, ever since, while striving to aid Philippe, you showed me what a great heart you have."

Fine looked serious.

"And shall I tell you something, too, Monsieur Marius? asked she blushing. 'Of course; confessions seem to be abundant!'"

"Well, then, I will; but it is a great secret: I have loved you—a little—ever since you declined to allow my uncle to liberate your brother, before we paid him the fifteen thousand francs!"

Marius was not a demonstrative young man, but he could not help giving the flower-girl a rousing kiss full in the mouth.

"When shall the wedding take place?" asked he gallantly.

"Whenever you like," answered Fine. "By the way," said Marius, as a thought suddenly came to him, "why were you so dejected when I came in?"

"Because I fancied that you would not care for me now you had become a deputy!"

In due time, every formality having been complied with, there was a double civil marriage at the mayor's office in Marseilles. The contracting parties being Philippe and Blanche, the newly chosen deputy and Josephine Coudourdan, no longer Fine, the flower girl. The next day at the Sicut Victor church, the Abbé Chastanier celebrated the nuptials of the two couples according to the rite of God. M. de Cazalis was tried and convicted, but through the intercession of Marius Cayol, he was sentenced to only a single month's imprisonment.



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