

THE FLOWER GIRLS

Marseilles!

(Continued.)

Those men make a display at Marseilles, of their vanity and their insolence; they have become devotees and hypocrites; they have deceived even the honest folks who salute and esteem them. In a word, they form an aristocracy of their own; past is forgotten; one sees but the wealth of the present. Well, I will tear off the masks. Listen: this one has made fortune by betraying a friend; another by selling human flesh; another by selling his wife or his daughter; another by speculating on the misfortunes of his creditors; another by redeeming at a low figure, after having himself adroitly discredited it, all the stock of a company of which he was the superintendent; another by sinking a ship loaded with stones instead of merchandise, and making the insurance company pay him the price of this strange cargo; another, a partner by verbal agreement, by refusing to share the hazard of an operation as soon as that operation became bad; another by hiding his assets, making two or three failures and living afterwards like a man of means; another by selling for wine extract of logwood or beef's blood; another by forestalling grain on the ocean during the years of scarcity; another by defrauding the revenue on a large scale, by striving to corrupt the employes and by stealing his fill from the administration; another by placing on notes forced signatures of relatives or friends, who were afraid to deny them on the day of maturity, and paid rather than compromise the forger; another by himself burning his factory ships, insured beyond their value; another by tearing up and throwing into the fire the notes he snatched from his creditor's hands on the day of payment; another by gambling at the Bourse with the intention of not paying if he lost, and, in fact, by refusing to pay, which did not prevent him from enriching himself, a week afterwards, at the expense of some dupe.

M. de Girousse's breath failed him. He maintained a long silence, allowing his anger to cool. Then his lips again opened and his smile was less bitter: "I am somewhat of a misanthrope," said he, mildly, to Marius, who had listened to him with pain and surprise; "I see everything in sombre colors. The reason is that the idleness to which my title condemns me has permitted me to study the pollutions of this district. But know that there are some honest people among us; if they would rise in a body, they could easily crush the scoundrels. I pray God every night that this civil war of virtue against vice may break out at an early day. As for you, count only upon the equity of the magistracy; you will find in it a firm support, independent and loyal. Its members do not crawl like slaves at the bidding of the rich and powerful. I have always had for the magistracy a fanatical respect, for it is the representative of truth and justice on earth."

Marius took leave of M. de Girousse, altogether overwhelmed by the fiery words he had heard. He foresaw that his brother would be pitilessly convicted. The commencement of the proceedings was set down for the following day.

CHAPTER X.

PHILIPPE'S TRIAL.

All Aix was excited. Gossip bursts out with strange energy in those quiet little towns, where the curiosity of the idlers has not each day a new ailment. Nothing was talked of but Philippe and Blanche; the adventures of the young lovers were related in the open street; it was loudly asserted that the accused was convicted in advance, and that M. de Cazalis had, either personally through his friends, demanded his conviction of each juror.

The clergy of Aix lent its support to the deputy, feebly enough, it is true; that clergy then contained eminent and honorable men to whom promoting an injustice was repugnant. A few priests, nevertheless, yielded to the influence coming from the religious society of Marseilles, of which the Abbe Donadei was, so to speak, the master. These priests strove by visits and shrewd proceedings to bind the hands of the magistracy, the upright and firm spirit of which was feared. They succeeded only in persuading the jurors that the cause of M. de Cazalis was holy.

The nobility strongly aided them in this task. They believed themselves in honor bound to crush Philippe Cayol. They regarded him as a personal enemy, who had dared to make a criminal attempt against the dignity of one of their number, and who had thus insulted them in a body. To see the comtes and marquises agitate themselves, get angry and unite together, one would have thought that the foment were at the gates of the town. The matter in hand was simply to cause the conviction of a poor devil, guilty of love and ambition.

Philippe also had friends and defenders. All the people declared frankly for him. The lower classes blamed his conduct, censured the means he had employed, and said that he would have done better to have loved and wedded the daughter of some plain citizen like himself; but, while condemning his actions, they noisily defended him against the pride and hatred of M. de Cazalis. It was known in the town that Blanche, before the Judge d'Instruction, had denied her love, and the girls of the people, true Provencals, that is to say devoted and courageous, treated her with insulting contempt. They called her "the renegade"; they assigned infamous motives for her conduct, and did not hesitate to cry out their opinion in the public squares, in the energetic language of the streets.

This noise singularly compromised Philippe's cause. The entire town was

in the secret of the drama which was about to be played. Those who were interested in having the accused convicted did not even take the trouble to conceal their proceedings, being certain of their triumph; those who wished to save Marius' brother, feeling themselves weak and disarmed, found solace in shouting, happy to irritate the powerful people whom they had no hope of conquering.

M. de Cazalis had, without shame, dragged his niece to Aix. During the first days he took a proud delight in exhibiting her upon the Cours. He protested thus against the idea of disgrace which the crowd attached to the young girl's flight; he seemed to say to all: "You see that a clown cannot harm a Cazalis. My niece still towers above you from the height of her title and fortune!"

But he could not long continue such pronouncements. The crowd grew angry at his attitude; it insulted Blanche, and was on the point of hurling stones at the uncle and niece. The women especially showed exasperation; they did not comprehend that the young girl was not altogether to be blamed and that she was simply obeying an iron will.

Blanche trembled at the popular fury. She bowed her head that she might not see those women who glared at her with fiery eyes. She was conscious of gestures of contempt behind her; she heard horrible words which she did not understand, and her limbs quaked beneath her; she clung to her uncle's arm that she might not fall. Pale and quivering, she returned to her dwelling one day, declaring that she would go out no more. The poor child was about to become a mother.

Finally, the proceedings began. From early in the morning, the doors of the Palais-de-Justice were besieged; groups formed in the midst of the Place des Precheurs, gesticulating and talking in loud tones. People grew noisier over the probable issue of the trial; they discussed the culpability of Philippe and the attitude of M. de Cazalis and Blanche. The court room filled up slowly. Several rows of chairs had been added for persons; rovided with tickets; these persons were so numerous that nearly all of them were compelled to stand. In the crush were to be seen the flower of the nobility, lawyers, officials—in short, all the notable personages of Aix. Never had an accused drawn such an audience. When the doors were opened to allow the general public to enter, only a few curious persons were able to get in. The others were obliged to stand in the doorways, in the lobbies and even upon the steps of the Palais. And every instant there arose from that crowd murmur and shout, the sound of which penetrated into the court room and was augmented there, disturbing the tranquil majesty of the place.

The ladies had invaded the gallery. They formed up there a compact mass of anxious and smiling faces. Those who were on the first row fanned themselves, leaned over, allowing their gloved hands to rest upon the red velvet of the balustrade. Behind them, in the partial obscurity, mounted packed rows of rosy faces, the bodies belonging to which could not be seen. These rosy faces were as if buried in the midst of laces, ribbons, silks and satins; here and there sparkled the sudden flash of a jewel, when one of the heads was turned. And from that noisy and garrulous crowd fell freely laughter, soft words and sharp little cries. The ladies were at a play.

When Philippe Cayol was brought in, there was a sudden silence. All the ladies devoured him with their eyes; some of them pointed opera glasses at him, examining him from head to foot. This tall fellow, whose energetic features announced violent appetites, had a quiet success. The women, who had come to judge of Blanche's taste, doubtless thought the young girl less guilty when they saw the lofty stature and bright looks of her lover.

Philippe's attitude was calm and appropriate. He was clad wholly in black. He seemed to ignore the presence of the two gendarmes who were beside him; he straightened himself and sat down with the grace of a man of the world. Occasionally he glanced at the crowd, tranquilly and without effrontery. He several times raised his eyes to the gallery, and, each time, smiled tenderly in spite of himself; his incorrigible habits of loving and wishing to please resumed possession of him, even in the face of justice.

The bill of indictment was read. This document was very severe on the accused. In it the facts, according to the depositions of M. de Cazalis and his niece, were stated in an able and terrible manner. It was asserted that the young girl had been abducted by violence, that she had clung to an almond tree, and that, during the entire flight, the abductor had been compelled to employ intimidation to cause his victim to follow him. Finally, a most serious matter was brought forward on the affirmation of M. de Cazalis; she claimed that she had never written to Philippe, and that the two letters presented by the accused were antedated letters which he had forced her to write at Lambesc as a precautionary measure.

When the reading of the bill of indictment was finished, the court room was filled with a noisy murmur of conversation. Each person, before coming to the Palais, had a version of the affair, and the official recital was discussed in partially subdued voices. Outside, the crowd uttered veritable howls. The President threatened to order the court room cleared, and silence was gradually re-established.

The questioning of Philippe Cayol was then proceeded with.

phrase, altogether foolish and absurd as it seemed, contained nevertheless, the exact truth. The President remarked that the abduction of a man of thirty by a young girl was something unheard of.

"Neither have you ever heard," replied Philippe, tranquilly, "of a young girl of sixteen passing along the public highways, traversing towns, meeting hundreds of persons and not thinking of summoning the first passer to deliver her from her jailer!"

And he proceeded to show the utter impossibility of the violence and intimidation of which he was accused. At each hour of the day, Blanche had been free to quit him, to demand aid and relief; if she followed him, it was because she had consented to flight and marriage. Besides, Philippe displayed the greatest tenderness for the young girl and the greatest deference for M. de Cazalis. He admitted his errors; he merely asked that they should not make him out a base abductor.

The court was adjourned until the following day, which was set apart for hearing the statements of the witnesses.

That evening, the town was in confusion; the ladies spoke of Philippe with affected indignation, the grave men treated him with more or less severity and the masses defended him with energy.

The next day, the crowd at the doors of the Palais-de-Justice was larger and noisier than before. The witnesses were nearly all witnesses for the prosecution. M. de Girousse had not been summoned; they feared the rule freedom of his wit, and, besides, he should rather have been arrested as an accomplice. Marius himself had begged him not to compromise himself in the case. He, like his adversaries, feared the violent spirit of the old comte, who by a whim might spoil everything.

There was but one deposition in favor of Philippe, that of the Lambesc inn-keeper, who declared that Blanche gave him the title of husband. This deposition was effaced, so to speak, by those of the other witnesses. Marguerite, the milkmaid, stammered and said that she could not recall having carried M. de Cazalis' letter to the accused. Thus all the witnesses but one served the deputy's interests, either through fear or stupidity and lack of memory.

The speeches began and necessitated another session. Philippe's lawyer defended him with appropriate simplicity. He did not seek to excuse that which was culpable in his client's conduct; he represented him as an ardent and ambitious man, who had allowed himself to be led astray by hopes of wealth and love. But, at the same, he maintained that the accused could not be convicted of abduction, and that the affair in itself excluded all idea of violence and intimidation.

The speech of the Procureur du Roi was terrible. The defence had counted upon a certain mildness, and the official's energetic accusation produced a disastrous effect. The jury brought in a verdict of guilty. Philippe was sentenced to an imprisonment of five years and to be publicly exposed in one of the squares of Marseilles. The garcener Ayasse was sent to prison for a few months only.

CHAPTER XI.

BLANCHE AND FINE FACE TO FACE.

Blanche, hidden in the depths of the gallery, heard Philippe sentenced. She was there by order of her uncle, who wished to crush out whatever tenderness might be lingering in her by showing her her lover between two gendarmes like a thief. An aged family relative had been instructed to take her to this edifying spectacle.

As the two ladies were waiting for their carriage on the steps of the Palais, the crowd, precipitating itself from the building, suddenly separated them. Blanche, dragged into the middle of the Place des Precheurs, was recognized by the huckster women, who began to shout at and insult her.

"It is she, it is she!" cried these women. "The renegade, the renegade!"

The poor child, dismayed, not knowing where to flee, was dying with shame and fear, when a young girl with a powerful and scornful look, the howling group which she surrounded her and planted herself at her side.

It was Fine.

The flower-girl also had witnessed the conviction of Philippe. For nearly three hours, she had endured all the agonies of hope and fear; the speech of the Procureur du Roi had over whelmed her, and she had wept frantically on hearing the sentence pronounced.

She was leaving the Palais, irritated and terribly excited, when she heard the shouts of the huckster women. She comprehended that Blanche was there and that she could take vengeance by abusing her; she ran towards the spot, her fists clenched, with insults on her lips. In her eyes, the young girl was the greatest culprit; she had lied; she had perjured herself and committed a cowardly act. At these thoughts, all Fine's plebeian blood mounted to her face and urged her to cry out and strike.

She precipitated herself upon the crowd she scattered it to seize upon her prey.

glance, she saw that she was about to become a mother. She grew white as a sheet, and striding towards the women in the first row, said in a louder tone:

"Let us pass, I say! Do you not see the poor girl's condition, wretches, and that you will kill her child?"

She repulsed a gross huckster who was sneering. All the other women drew back. Fine's words had suddenly rendered them silent and compassionate. The young girls retired between two hedges of women, among whom ran vague murmurs of regret. Blanche, red with shame, clung with fear to her companion and feverishly hastened her steps.

The flower-girl, to avoid the Rue du Pont-Moreau, then full of people and noise, took the little Rue Saint-Jean. On reaching the Cours, she led Mlle. de Cazalis to her hotel the door of which was open. During the walk, she had not uttered a word.

Blanche forced her to enter the vestibule, and there, partially closing the door and almost going upon her knees, she said in a voice full of emotion:

"Oh! Mademoiselle, I thank you with all my soul for having come to my rescue! Those wicked women would have murdered me!"

"Do not thank me," answered Fine roughly. "I came like the rest to insult you, to beat you!"

"Yes, I hate you; I wish you had died in your cradle!"

Blanche stared at the flower-girl with astonishment. She drew herself up, her aristocratic instincts rebelled and her lips grew slightly pale with disdain. The two young girls stood face to face, the one with all her frail grace, the other in her fresh and energetic beauty. They contemplated each other silently, feeling surge in them the rivalry of their classes and hearts.

"You are beautiful, you are rich," resumed Fine, bitterly; "why did you steal my lover from me, when you knew that in the end you must despise and hate him? You should have sought in your own sphere; you should have found a stripling as pale and as cowardly as yourself, who would have satisfied your little girl's love. See here; if you aristocrats take our men, we will tear your pink and white faces for you!"

"I do not understand you," stammered Blanche, again seized by fear.

"You do not understand me! Listen, then: I loved Monsieur Philippe. He bought roses of me every morning, and my heart beat as if it would burst when I gave him my bouquets. I know now where those flowers went. I was told one day that he had fled with you. I wept; then I thought you loved him and that he would be happy. But you have put him in prison. Let us not speak of that, or I shall get angry and strike you!"

She paused, panting; then she continued, going close up to the girl, burning with her hot breath Blanche's icy cheeks:

"You do not know how we poor girls love. We love with all our flesh, with all our courage. When we elope with a man, we do not say afterwards that he took advantage of our weakness. We clasp him tightly in our arms to protect him. Ah! if Monsieur Philippe had loved me, he would not have been betrayed! But I am an unhappy creature, a beggar, an ugly wretch!"

And Fine began to sob, as weak as Mlle. de Cazalis. The latter took her hand, and said, her voice broken by tears:

"In pity, do not accuse me! Will you be my friend—shall I open my heart to you? If you only knew how much I suffer, you would have mercy. I can do nothing; I obey my uncle, who breaks me in his hands of iron. I know I am a coward; but I have not the strength to be otherwise than cowardly. And I love Philippe; he is always in my mind. Truly did he say to me: 'If you desert me, every hour of your life the remembrance of me will torment you, you will always feel on your lips the fiery stamp of my kisses, and that shall be your punishment!' He is here now; he burns me, he will kill me! A while ago, when he was sentenced, I felt something leap within me which shook me from head to foot and almost tore me to pieces. I am weeping—do you see? I ask mercy of you."

All Fine's anger had vanished; she sustained Blanche, who was staggering.

"You are right," continued the poor child; "I do not deserve pity. I have stricken the man I love and he will love me no more. Ah! in mercy, if some day he should become your husband, tell him of my tears, ask him to forgive me. What drives me wild is that I can never convince him that I adore him; he would laugh; he could not comprehend the extent of my cowardice. No; do not speak to him of me. Let him forget me—that will be best; I shall be the only one to weep."

There was a dolorous silence.

"And your child?" asked Fine.

"My child!" said, Blanche, wildly. "I do not know what will become of it. My uncle will take it from me."

"Would you like me to be a mother to it?"

The flower-girl uttered these words in a grave and tender voice. Mlle. de Cazalis clasped her in her arms in a passionate embrace.

"Oh! how good you are! You can love! Try to see me in Marseilles. When the time comes, I will trust in you."

At that moment, the aged female relative made her appearance, after having in vain searched for Blanche in the crowd. Fine withdrew quickly and hastened up the Cours. As she reached the Place des Carmelites, she saw Marius in the distance, talking with Philippe's lawyer.

The young man was in despair. Never had he imagined that his brother could be sentenced to so severe a punishment. The imprisonment of five years terrified him, but he was still more grievously over whelmed by the thought of the public exposure in one of the squares of Marseilles. He saw the deputy's hand in this chastisement; M. de Cazalis wished, above all else, to disgrace Philippe, to render him forever unworthy of a woman's love.

To be continued.

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