

THE FLOWER GIRLS

Marseilles!

Philippe felt himself lost, and his irritated pride restored his courage. If he had been armed, he would have defended himself. Then he said to himself that he was not an abductor, that Blanche had chosen to follow and marry him, and that, after all, the shame in the matter was not for him. At this he angrily pushed open the shutter, demanding what was wanted.

"Open the door for us," commanded the commissaire. "We will tell you afterwards what we want."

Philippe came down the wooden ladder and opened the door.

"Are you the Sieur Philippe Cayol?" asked the commissaire.

"Yes," answered the young man firmly.

"Then I arrest you as guilty of abduction. You have carried off a young girl under sixteen years of age, who should be hidden with you."

Philippe smiled disdainfully.

"The former Mademoiselle Blanche de Cazalis, who is now my wife, is up-stairs, said he. 'She can declare if there has been violence on my part. I know not what you mean in talking of abduction. I shall, this very day, throw myself at the feet of M. de Cazalis and ask his sanction of his niece's marriage with me.' Blanche, pale and trembling, descended the ladder. She had hastily dressed herself.

"Mademoiselle," said the commissaire to her, "I have orders to take you to your uncle, who is waiting for you at Aix. He is in tears.

"I am very sorry that I displeased my uncle," replied Blanche, with a certain firmness; "but no one must accuse M. Cayol whom I followed and married of my own free will."

And, turning towards the young man, moved, ready to sob anew:

"Hope Philippe," continued she, "I love you and will supplicate my uncle to be good to us. Our separation will last only a few days."

Philippe looked at her with a sorrowful air, shaking his head.

"You are a timid and weak child," said he, slowly.

Then he added in a harsh tone:

"Remember only that you are my wife, that you belong to me through the flesh and through the heart. 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."

Blanche wept.

"Love me as I love you," resumed the young man in a milder voice.

The commissaire put Blanche into a carriage, which he had sent for, and conducted her to Aix, while the two gendarmes took Philippe and led him to the prison of that town.

CHAPTER VII.

BLANCHE TURNS AGAINST PHILIPPE.

The news of the arrest did not reach Marseilles until the following day. It caused a tremendous sensation. In the afternoon M. de Cazalis was seen to pass with his niece over the Canobbierie. Gossip ran wild; everybody talked of the deputy's triumphant attitude, of Blanche's embarrassment and blushes. M. de Cazalis was the man to exhibit the young girl throughout all Marseilles, in order to let the people know that she was again under his control.

Marius, notified in the morning by Fine, had hurried about the city for hours. The public voice confirmed the news; he was able to seize on the wing all the details of the arrest. The fact, in a brief space, had become legendary, and the shop-keepers and corner idlers related it as if it had been a marvellous story of a century before. The young man, weary of hearing these idle tales, went to his office, his head aching, not knowing upon what to decide.

Unfortunately, M. Martelly was absent and would not return until the following evening. Marius felt the necessity of acting sooner; he wished at once to take some steps which would reassure him in regard to his brother's fate. His fears consequent upon the reception of the news had, however, somewhat subsided; he had reflected that, after all, his brother could not be accused of abduction, and that Blanche would be on hand to defend him at any moment. He innocently arrived at the belief that he ought to visit M. de Cazalis to demand of him, in his brother's name, his sanction to Philippe's marriage with his niece.

The next morning he dressed himself in a complete suit of black and was descending the stairs, when Fine presented herself according to her custom. The poor girl grew deadly pale when Marius informed her of the object of his errand.

"Will you let me accompany you?" asked she, in a supplicating tone. "I will await in the street the answer of the young lady's uncle."

She followed Marius. On reaching the Cours Bonaparte, the young man entered the deputy's house with a firm step and caused himself to be announced.

M. de Cazalis' blind rage had averted Heheld his vengeance. He was about to demonstrate the greatness of his power by crushing one of those liberals whom he detested. He now desired only to taste the cruel joy of playing with his prey. He ordered M. Carus Cayol to be admitted. He expected tears and ardent supplications.

The young man found him in the centre of a large salon, standing, with a haughty and implacable air. He advanced towards him, and, without giving him time to speak, said, in a calm and polite tone:

"Monsieur, I have the honor to ask you in the name of my brother, M. Philippe Cayol, for your sanction to the marriage between him and Mademoiselle Blanche de Cazalis your niece."

The deputy was literally thunderstruck.

He could not get angry, so grotesquely extravagant did Marius' demand seem to him. Drawing back, staring the young man in the face and laughing disdainfully he answered:

"You are mad, Monsieur. I am aware that you are a hard-working and honest fellow, and that is the reason I do not order my servants to put you out of the house. Your brother is a scoundrel, a knave who will be punished according to his deserts. What do you want of me?"

Marius, on hearing his brother insulted, felt a precious desire to fall like a clown upon the noble personage and beat him with his fists. He restrained himself and continued, in a voice which began to tremble with emotion:

"I have told you what I want, Monsieur. I came here to offer Mademoiselle de Cazalis the only reparation possible—a legal marriage sanctioned by you. Thus the wrong that has been done her will be obliterated."

"We are above wrong!" cried the deputy, contemptuously. "There is no shame for Blanche de Cazalis in having been beloved by a fellow like Philippe Cayol, but there would be shame for her in allying herself with such people as you. I will never sanction that marriage, which, without my consent is null and void."

"Such people as we are have other ideas in regard to honor. But I do not insist; duty alone dictated to me the offer of reparation which you refuse. Permit me only to add that your niece would, without doubt, urge upon you a different course, if I had the honor of addressing myself to her."

"Do you think so?" said M. de Cazalis, in a jeering tone.

He rang and ordered his niece to be brought thither immediately. Blanche entered, pale, her eyes red. She looked as if riven by too strong emotions. On perceiving Marius, she trembled.

"Mademoiselle," said her uncle coldly, "there is a gentleman who formally asks for your hand in the name of the infamous wretch whom I forbear to mention otherwise in your presence. Tell the gentleman what you told me yesterday."

Blanche wavered. She dared not look at Marius. With eyes fixed upon her uncle, all in a tremble, she murmured, in a sitting and feeble voice:

"I told you that I was abducted by violence, and forced into a marriage, and that I would use every effort to obtain punishment for the odious wrong of which I was the victim."

These words were recited like a lesson learned. Following the example of St. Peter, Blanche denied her Lord.

M. de Cazalis had not lost his time. The moment his niece was in his power, he brought to bear upon her all his pride, prejudice and all his power. He realized that she alone could make him win the game. It was imperative that the young girl should lie, that she should stifle the revolts and the cries of her heart, that she should be a yielding and passive instrument in his hands.

For four hours he poured cold and sharp words into her ears. He did not commit the imprudence of showing anger. He spoke with crushing haughtiness, reminding her of the antiquity of her race, talking of his power and his fortune. He displayed exquisite cunning, sketching on one side the picture of a rich and vulgar mesalliance, showing on the other side the noble joys of a rich and great marriage. He attacked the young girl through her coquetry, her vanity, her appetite for luxury and her self-love; he fatigued her, broke her, stupefied her, rendered her what he wished her to be—supple and inert.

After this long interview, this long martyrdom, Blanche was conquered. Perhaps, under her uncle's overwhelming words, her patrician blood at last revolted at the remembrance of Philippe's brutal caresses; perhaps, her childish vanity was aroused at the mention of luxurious toilets, honors of all kinds and worldly delights. Besides, her head was too weak, her heart too cowardly, to resist the deputy's terrible will. Each phrase uttered by M. de Cazalis had struck her, crushed her, filled her with dolorous anxiety. She had loved, followed and married Philippe through weakness; now she had turned against him also through weakness; she was still the same timid and inexperienced soul. She had accepted everything. She had promised everything. She had been eager to escape from the suffocating weight which her uncle's discourse had heaped upon her.

When Marius heard her make her strange declaration, he stood stupefied, filled with terror. He recalled the young girl's attitude at the house of the gardener Ayasse; he saw her hanging about Philippe's neck, faint, trusting, and loving.

"Ah! Mademoiselle," cried he, bitterly, "the odious wrong of which you were the victim appeared to exasperate you less the day you begged me with clasped hands to implore your uncle's pardon and consent. Have you reflected that your falsehood will cause the ruin of the man whom, perhaps, you still love and who is your husband in the sight of God?"

Blanche, rigid, her lips pressed together, stared vaguely before her.

"I know not what you mean," answered she, hesitatingly, "I have told no falsehood. I yielded to force. That man deceived and wronged me, and my uncle will avenge the honor of our family."

Marius straightened up. Generous anger added to his short stature and his thin face grew beautiful with justice and truth. He glanced around him, and, with a gesture of contempt, said, in a measured tone:

"And I am in the Cazals mansion, I am in the home of the descendants of the illustrious family which Providence delights to honor. I knew not that falsehood dwelt within these walls, and did not expect to find calumny and cowardice sheltered here. O! you shall here me to the end. I wish to cast my lackey's dignity into the unworthy face of my masters!"

Then, turning to the deputy and pointing towards Blanche, who was quiver-

ing like a leaf, he resumed:

"That child is innocent; I pardon her weakness. But you, Monsieur, you are a crafty man; you protect maidens by making them liars and cowards; you are indeed a noble son of your fathers. If now you were to offer me for my brother your sanction to this marriage with Mademoiselle Blanche de Cazalis, I would refuse it, for I have never lied, I have never committed an evil action, and I should blush to ally myself with such people as you?"

M. de Cazalis bent beneath the young man's fury. At the first insult, he had summoned a tall devil of a lackey, who was standing on the threshold of the door. As the deputy signed to him to throw Marius into the street, the latter continued with a terrible burst of anger:

"I swear to you that I will cry murder if that man take a step. Let me pass. Some day, Monsieur, I may, perhaps, be able to hurl into your face before everybody the truths I have just spoken in this salon!"

And he departed with a deliberate and firm step. He no longer saw Philippe's guilt; in his eyes his brother had become a victim whom he wished to save and avenge at any cost. In his upright soul the smallest falsehood, the least injustice brought on a tempest. Already the gossip, which M. de Cazalis had set afloat at the time of the flight, had made him assume the defence of the fugitives; now that Blanche had lied and that the deputy was making use of the calumny, he longed to be powerful enough to take justice into his own hands and proclaim the truth in the open street.

He found Fine upon the sidewalk. Uneasiness was devouring her.

"Well?" asked the young girl as soon as she saw him.

"Well," answered Marius, "those people are miserable liars and proud idiots."

Fine took a long breath. A wave of blood mounted to her cheeks.

"Then," said she, "Monsieur Philippe's marriage with the young lady is not to be acknowledged?"

"The young lady," replied Marius with a bitter smile, "claims that Philippe is a scoundrel who abducted her by violence and forced her to marry him! My brother is lost!"

Fine did not understand. She bowed her head, asking herself how the young lady could call her lover a scoundrel. And she thought that she would have been delighted to have been married to Philippe, even through violence. Marius rage enchanted her; the project for legalizing the marriage had failed.

"Your brother is lost you say," murmured she, with tender cajolery. "Oh! I will save him—we will save him together!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE POWERLESS BROTHER.

When, in the evening, Marius related to M. Martelly the interview he had had with M. de Cazalis, the ship-owner said to him, shaking his hand:

"I know not what advice to give you, my friend. I do not wish to fill you with despair, but rest assured that you will be vanquished. It is your duty to engage in the struggle, and I will second you as best I may. Let us admit, however, between ourselves, that we are weak and disarmed in face of an adversary who has on his side the clergy and the nobility. Marseilles and Aix love not the monarchy of July, and these two cities are entirely devoted to a deputy of the opposition who makes terrible war on M. Thiers. They will aid M. de Cazalis in his vengeance; I speak of the leaders; the people will help us, if they can help any one. Our best plan would be to win to our cause an influential member of the clergy. Do you not know some priest in favor with the bishop?"

Marius answered that he knew the Abbe Chastanier, a poor old fellow who was entirely powerless.

"No matter; see him," said the ship-owner. "The citizens cannot help us; the nobility would thrust us ignominiously into the street, if we asked favors of them. The church remains. It is there we must knock. Take the matter in hand; I will work on my side."

Marius, the next day, went to Saint Victor. The Abbe Chastanier received him with a sort of terrified embarrassment.

"Do not ask anything of me!" cried he, at the young man's first words. "It is known that I have already meddled with that affair, and I have received grave reproaches. As I have told you, I am only a poor man; I can do nothing but pray God."

The humble attitude of the old priest touched Marius. He was about to depart when the abbe retained him and said, in a low tone:

"Listen: there is a man here, the Abbe Donadei, who could be useful to you. It is said that he stands on the best footing with M. de Cazalis. He is a foreign priest, an Italian, I believe, who, in a few months, has won everybody's love."

The Abbe Chastanier paused, hesitating, seeming to interrogate himself. The worthy man thought that he was about to compromise himself terribly, but could not resist the sweet joy of rendering a service.

"Do you wish me to accompany you to his house?" asked he, suddenly.

Marius, who had noticed his brief hesitation, strove to refuse; but the old man was resolved; he no longer heeded his personal peace; he wished to content his conscience.

"Come," resumed he. "The Abbe Donadei lives but a short distance from here, on the Boulevard de la Corderie."

betray the least astonishment. He offered chairs with a cajoling gesture, half bent, half smiling, doing the honors of his study as a woman would do the honors of her toilet chamber.

He wore a long black robe, loose at the waist. His had a coquettish look in that plain costume; his white and delicate hands emerged as small as a woman's from broad sleeves, and his shaven visage maintained a tender freshness amid the chestnut curls of his hair. He appeared to be about thirty.

He seated himself in an arm chair and listened, with smiling gravity, to what Marius had to say. He made him repeat the details of the flight of Philippe and Blanche; the narrative seemed to interest him infinitely.

The Abbe Donadei was born at Rome. He had an uncle a cardinal. One fine day, that uncle sent him hurriedly to France, without people ever discovering exactly why. On his arrival, the handsome abbe was compelled to enter the little seminary of Aix as professor of living languages. A situation so low down in the scale humiliated him to such a point that he fell ill.

The cardinal was moved and recommended his nephew to the Bishop of Marseilles. Then satisfied ambition cured Donadei. He entered Saint Victor, and, as the Abbe Chastanier innocently remarked, had won everybody's love in a few months. His caressing Italian nature and his mild, rosy face made him the delight of the demure lady devotees of the parish. He triumphed particularly when in the pulpit; his slight accent gave a strange charm to his sermons, and when he opened his arms, he imparted to his hands quivers of emotion which melted the congregation to tears.

Like almost all Italians, he was born for intrigue. He used and abused his uncle's recommendation to the Bishop of Marseilles. Soon he was a power, a hidden power which toils beneath the surface and opens pits for the steps of those it wishes to rid itself of. He became a member of a religious society; all-powerful in Marseilles, and, by his suppleness in smiling and bowing, imposed his will upon his colleagues and made himself the head of a party. Then, he mixed himself up with every event, glided into all affairs; he it was who had caused M. de Cazalis to be named deputy, and he was awaiting a suitable opportunity to demand of him payment for his services. His plan was to work for the success of the rich; later, when he had merited their gratitude, he counted upon making them work in their turn to advance his own fortune.

He questioned Marius with complacency; he seemed from his attention, from the kindness of his reception, to be altogether disposed to aid him in his work of deliverance. The young man allowed himself to be trapped by the amiable mildness of his manners; he opened his soul to him, told him his projects and admitted that the clergy alone could save his brother. Finally, asked him to use his influence with M. de Cazalis. Then the Abbe Donadei arose and, in a tone of austere pleasantry, said:

To be continued.

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