

THE FLOWER GIRLS —OF— Marseilles!

(Continued.)

In due time, all the clerk's predictions were fulfilled point by point. Berard was sentenced for simple failure to a month's imprisonment. A year later, his countenance rosy, his bearing easy and insolent, he displayed throughout Marseilles his joyous, rich man's whims. He dined his gold in the clubs, the restaurants and the theatres—everywhere in fact, where pleasures were to be bought. And, upon his path, he always found toadies or dupes who bowed to the very ground before him.

CHAPTER XIV. A DEFAULTER.

Marius went mechanically to the harbor. He walked straight on, not knowing whither his feet led him. He was as if stupefied. A single idea surged in his empty head, and that idea repeated, like the murmur of a bell, that he must have fifteen thousand francs at once. He cast around him that vague look of helpless people, he seemed to search the street to see if he could not find between the two paving-stones the sum he needed.

At the harbor, a desire for wealth came to him. The merchandise heaped up along the quays, the ships which brought in fortunes, the noise and the stir of the crowd which was making money irritated him. Never before had he felt his poverty, rebellious and full of jealous bitterness. He asked himself why he was poor, why others were rich.

And constantly the sound of the bell murmured in his ear. Fifteen thousand francs! Fifteen thousand francs! The very thought of them nearly burst his skull. He could not return with empty hands. His brother was waiting for him. He had only a few hours to save him from infamy. And he could find nothing; his benumbed intelligence did not furnish him with a single practicable idea. He twisted in his powerlessness; he racked his mind vainly; he struggled with rage and anxiety.

Never would he have dared to ask his employer, M. Martelly, for fifteen thousand francs. His salary was too small to guarantee such a loan. Besides, he knew the ship-owner's rigid principle and feared his reproaches should he admit to him that he wished to buy a conscience. M. Martelly would indignantly refuse him the money.

Suddenly, an idea came to Marius. He would not discuss it with himself, and started in hot haste for his apartment on the Rue Sainte.

In the same house, upon the same landing as himself, dwelt a young employe, named Charles Blety. Blety was attached as cashier to the soap manufactory of MM. Daste et Degans. The two young men being neighbors, a sort of intimacy had arisen between them. Marius had been won by Charles' gentleness; Blety was an assiduous frequenter of the churches, his conduct was exemplary and he seemed to be of the highest probity.

For two years, however, he had indulged in heavy expenses. He had introduced veritable sumptuousness into his little apartment, purchasing carpets, hangings, mirrors and handsome furniture. Since this change, he came in later at night and lived more luxuriously; but he had always remained gentle and honest, tranquil and pious.

At first, Marius had been astonished at his neighbor's expenses; he could not comprehend how an employe on a salary of eighteen hundred francs could buy such costly things. But Charles had told him that he intended soon to give up his situation to live like a prosperous citizen. He had even put himself at his disposal offering him his purse without restriction Marius had refused.

Now he had thought of this offer. He was going to knock at Charles Blety's door and ask him to save his brother. A loan of fifteen thousand francs would not, perhaps, embarrass that young man, who seemed to throw money out of the windows. Marius counted upon repaying him little by little, persuaded that his neighbor would grant him the necessary time.

He did not find the clerk in his apartment on the Rue Sainte, and, as he was pressed, he determined to go to the soap manufactory of MM. Daste et Degans. This soap manufactory was situated on the Boulevard des Dames.

When he reached it and asked for Charles Blety, it seemed to him that the people stared at him with a strange air. The workmen told him roughly to inquire of M. Daste, who was in his office. Marius, astonished at this reception, decided to go to the manufacturer. He found him in conference with three gentlemen, who stopped talking as he entered.

"Can you tell me, Monsieur," asked the young man, "if M. Charles Blety is at the manufactory?"

Daste exchanged a rapid glance with one of the persons present, a stout gentleman, grave and severe.

"M. Charles Blety will soon be here," answered he. "Be kind enough to wait for him. Are you one of his friends?"

"Yes," replied Marius frankly. "He lodges in the same house as myself. I have known him nearly three years." Silence was maintained for a moment. The young man, thinking that his presence embarrassed the gentleman, added bowing and going towards the door: "I thank you; I will wait outside."

Then the stout gentleman leaned over and said something to the manufacturer. M. Daste stopped Marius with a gesture.

"Remain, if you please," said he. "Your presence may be useful to us. You ought to know Blety's habits; you can, doubtless, give us some information in regard to him!"

Marius, surprised and not understanding, made a gesture of hesitation.

"Pardon," resumed M. Daste, with great politeness; "I see that my words amaze you."

He pointed to the stout gentleman and continued:

"Monsieur is the commissaire de police of the quarter, and I have just summoned him to arrest Charles Blety, who, in two years, has stolen from us sixty thousand francs!"

Marius, on hearing Charles accused of robbery, understood everything. He explained to himself the young man's reckless expenses. He thanked Heaven that he had not in the past accepted his offers of service. Never would he have believed that his neighbor could have been guilty of a base action. He well knew that there was in Marseilles, as in all the great centres of industry, unworthy employes, young men who robbed their employers to satisfy their vices and their love of luxury; he had often heard of clerks who received a hundred and fifty francs a month and who yet found the means to lose enormous sums at the clubs, to throw twenty-franc pieces to beggars and to eat at restaurants and cafes. But Charles had seemed so pious, so modest and so honest, and had played the role of hypocrite with so much art that Marius had been deceived by these appearances of probity and that he had his doubts even yet, despite M. Daste's formal accusation.

He sat down, awaiting the denouement of this drama. He could not do otherwise. For half an hour a dull silence reigned in the office. The manufacturer had begun to write. The commissaire de police and the two agents, mute and as if half asleep, gazed vaguely before them, with a terrible patience. Such a spectacle would have given honesty to Marius had he lacked it. Nothing could have been more sinister than those three impassible men; they looked like the inexorable law awaiting crime.

A sound of footsteps was heard; the door opened gently.

"He is our man," said M. Daste, rising. Charles Blety entered, suspecting nothing. He did not even notice the persons who were in the office.

"Do you wish to see me Monsieur?" asked he, in that drawing tone which employes assume when speaking to their chiefs.

As M. Daste looked him in the face with cutting contempt, he turned and saw the commissaire whom he knew by sight. He grew frightfully pale; he realized that he was lost, and his whole body quivered with shame and fear. He had hurled himself headlong into a trap. Seeing that his terror accused him, he strove to appear calm, to recover a little coolness and audacity.

"Yes, I wish to see you," cried M. Daste, violently. "You know why do you not? Ah! wretch, you will rob me no more!"

"I do not know what you mean," stammered Blety. "I have stolen nothing from you. Of what do you accuse me?"

The commissaire had seated himself at the manufacturer's desk to commit the facts of the case to writing. The two agents guarded the door.

"Monsieur," said the commissaire to Daste, "be kind enough to tell me under what circumstances you detected the defalcations which the Sieur Blety has, as you assert, committed to your detriment."

Daste then related the story of the robbery. He said that his cashier had some time been extraordinarily slow in making certain returns. But, as he had unlimited confidence in the young man, he had attributed these delays to the bad faith of the debtors. The first defalcation must have been made at least eighteen months before. Finally, on the preceding day, one of his customers having failed, Daste himself went to demand the payment of a sum of five thousand francs, and learned that Blety had collected the amount several weeks previously. The manufacturer, frightened, hastily returned to the manufactory and convinced himself by running over the cashier's books, that he was nearly sixty thousand francs short.

The commissaire afterwards proceeded to question Blety. The young man, taken unawares and being unable to deny the facts, invented a ridiculous story.

"One day," said he, "I lost a pocket-book containing forty thousand francs. I dared not admit this large loss to M. Daste. Then I began to take money to take money to gamble at the Bourse, hoping to win and reimburse the firm."

The commissaire asked him for details perplexed him and forced him to contradict himself. Blety tried another lie.

"You are right," resumed he: "I lost no pocket-book. I prefer to tell everything. The truth is that I myself was robbed. I lodged a young man who was without bread. One night, he vanished, carrying away with him my collection bag; in that bag was a considerable sum of money."

"Do not aggravate your crime by lying," said the commissaire, with that terrifying patience of the police authorities. "You know that we cannot believe you. You are telling us idle tales."

He turned towards Marius and continued:

"I requested M. Daste to detain you, Monsieur, that you might aid us in our task. The accused is your neighbor, your son. Do you know nothing of his manner of living? Can you not conjure him with us to tell the truth?"

Marius was terribly embarrassed. Blety filled him with pity; he staggered like a drunken man; he supplicated him with a look. The young fellow was not a hardened rogue; he had, without doubt, yielded to temptations, to cowardice of mind and heart. Nevertheless, Marius' conscience made itself heard; it ordered him to tell what he knew. The young man did not reply directly to the commissaire; he preferred to address Blety himself.

"Listen, Charles," said he: "I know not whether you are guilty or innocent. I have always seen you good and modest. I know that you support your mother and that you are beloved by all who are ac-

quainted with you. If you have committed a folly, admit your blindness; you will cause those who have had esteem and friendship for you to suffer less by frankly accusing yourself and showing sincere repentance."

Marius spoke in a gentle and convincing tone. Blety, whom the sharp words of the commissaire had left mute and confusedly irritated, bent beneath the austere indulgence of his former friend. He thought of his mother; he thought of that esteem and those friendships which he was about to lose, and a keen emotion took him by the throat. He burst into sobs.

He wept scalding tears in his hands which he held over his face, and for several minutes only his terrible groans of despair were heard. It was a complete confession. Everybody remained silent. "Yes!" cried Blety, at last, in the midst of his tears, "I did steal and I am a wretch! I did not know what I was doing. I took at first a few hundred francs; then I wanted a thousand, two thousand, five thousand, ten thousand francs at a time! It seemed to me that somebody was pushing me on from behind! My needs and my appetites increased instantly."

"But what have you done with all this money?" asked the commissaire.

"I do not know. I gave it away, spent it in riotous living and lost it at cards. You cannot imagine the whirl I was in, I was calm in my poverty; I aspired to nothing; I loved to pray in the churches, to lead a holy life like an honest man. And yet I have tasted luxury and vice; I have entertained reckless companions; I have bought fine furniture. I was out of my senses!"

"Can you give me the names of the money you stole?"

"As if I knew their names! I made their acquaintance here, there and everywhere—in the streets and at the public balls. They came because my pockets were full of gold, and they left me when my pockets were empty. Then I lost much at bacchante at the clubs. What made me a thief was seeing certain young men belonging to fine families throw money out of the windows and wallow in wealth and idleness. I wished to have, like them, boon companions, noisy pleasures, nights of gaming and revelry. I needed thirty thousand francs a year and made but eighteen hundred. Then I stole."

The wretch, stifling, choking with grief let himself fall upon a chair. Marius approached M. Daste, who himself was moved, and begged him to be indulgent. Afterwards, he hastened to withdraw; this scene made his heart bleed. He left Blety in a sort of stupor, a kind of nervous prostration. A few months later he learned that the cashier had been sentenced to five years' imprisonment.

When Marius found himself in the street, he felt greatly relieved. He realized that Heaven had given him a lesson in causing him to witness Blety's arrest. Several hours before, at the harbor he had had evil thoughts of fortune; he had felt a sort of hatred for the rich. He had just seen whether such thoughts and such feelings might lead.

And, suddenly, he remembered why he went to the soap manufactory. He had now but an hour left him to find the fifteen thousand francs with which to save his brother.

CHAPTER XV.

PHILIPPE REFUSES TO ESCAPE.

Marius mentally acknowledged that he was powerless. He no longer knew where to apply. One does not borrow fifteen thousand francs in an hour, when one is merely a clerk.

He passed slowly down the Rue d'Aix his brain aching, finding nothing in his benumbed thoughts. Money troubles are terrible; one would rather struggle against an assassin than against the eluding and overwhelming phantom of poverty. Nobody has, up to the present time, been able to invent a hundred-sou piece.

When the young man reached the Cours Belzunce, hopeless and brought to a stand by necessity, he resolved to return empty-handed to Aix. The diligence was about to start; only one place on the imperiale was left. Marius took that place joyfully; he preferred to remain in the open air, for anxiety was stifling him and he hoped that the broad country horizons would calm his fever.

It was a sorrowful journey. In the morning he had passed the same trees, the same hills, and the hope which made him smile then threw a mild and delicious brightness over the fields and hills. Now, he again saw the same scenes and imparted to them all the sadness of his soul; the country seemed funereal to him. The heavy vehicle rolled onward; the cultivated lands, the groves of pines and the little hamlets stretched out along the highway; and Marius found in each new landscape a more sinister morning, a more poignant grief. Night came on; it appeared to him that the entire region was covered with an immense sheet of black crape.

When he arrived at Aix, he went towards the prison with a lingering step. He said to himself that, no matter how late he might be, he would still bring the bad news too soon. He entered the jail at nine o'clock in the evening. Revertgat and Fine were playing cards at a corner of the table to kill time.

The flower-girl arose with a joyous bound and ran to the young man.

"Well?" asked she, with a bright smile, throwing back her head coquettishly.

Marius dare not reply. He sat down, despairingly.

"Why don't you speak?" cried Fine. Have you the money?"

"No," answered the young man simply. He drew a long breath and told them of Berard's failure, Blety's arrest and all the misfortunes that had happened to him at Marseilles. He closed by saying: "Now, I am only a poor devil. My brother will remain a prisoner."

The flower-girl stood in dolorous surprise. With hands clasped, in that attitude of pity which women of Provence

assume, she murmured, in a tone of lamentation:

"Oh! how hard, how hard!"

She looked at her uncle; she seemed to urge him to speak. Revertgat contemplated the two young people with compassion. They saw that a struggle was taking place in him. Finally, coming to a decision, he said to Marius:

"Listen, Monsieur: My vocation has not so hardened me that I am insensible to the grief of deserving people. I have already told you why I sold you your brother's freedom. But I will not have you think that I am influenced only by the love of money. If unfortunate circumstances prevent you from putting me at present beyond reach of want, I will none the less open the door for Monsieur Philippe. You can help me later, you can pay me the fifteen thousand francs son by son, when you are able."

Fine, on hearing these words, clapped her hands. She leaped up on her uncle's neck and kissed him full in the mouth. Marius became grave.

"I cannot accept your devotion," answered he. "I already reproach myself for having made you false to your duty. I refuse to aggravate my responsibility by throwing you, in addition, into the street without a morsel of bread!"

The flower-girl turned towards the young man almost with anger.

"Hold your tongue!" cried she. "Monsieur Philippe must be saved. I wish it. Besides, we can open the prison doors without you. Come uncle. If Monsieur Philippe consents, his brother will have nothing to say."

Marius followed the young girl and the jailer, who went towards the prisoner's cell. They had taken a dark lantern and glided through the corridors so as not to arouse attention.

They all three entered the cell and closed the door behind them. Philippe was asleep. Revertgat, moved by his niece's tears, had ameliorated as much as possible for the young man the severe regimen of the prison; he had carried to him breakfast and dinner prepared by Fine herself; he had loaned him books and had even given him a supplementary coverlet. The cell had become habitable, and Philippe was not too weary of it; he knew, besides, that preparations for his flight were being made.

He awoke, and put out his hands effusively to his brother and the flower-girl.

"Have you come for me?" asked he with a smile.

"Yes," replied Fine. Dress yourself quickly.

Marius was silent. His heart beat with great thumps. He feared lest an ardent desire for freedom might make his brother accept this flight, which he had deemed it his duty to refuse.

"So all is understood and arranged," resumed Philippe. "I can escape without fear and without remorse. Have you paid the money promised? Why don't you answer me Marius?"

Fine hurriedly interposed.

"I told you to make haste!" cried she.

"What are you uneasy about?"

She had gathered up the young man's garments; she threw them to him, adding that she would wait in the corridor.

Marius stopped her with a gesture.

"Pardon," said he; "I cannot allow my brother to remain in ignorance of our misfortunes."

And, despite Fine's impatience, he repeated the particulars of his journey to Marseilles. But he offered no advice; he wished to allow his brother full freedom of choice.

"Then," cried Philippe, overwhelmed, "you have not given me the money to the jailer! We are without a sou!"

"Don't trouble yourself about that," said Revertgat, approaching. "You can pay me later."

The prisoner was mute. He thought no more of flight; he thought of poverty and of the sorry figure he would cut thenceforth upon the promenades of Marseilles. No more elegant garments, no more liding about, no more love affairs! Besides, he had chivalrous feelings and poetical ideas which prevented him from accepting the jailer's devotion. He returned to his miserable bed, pulled the coverlet up to his chin and said, in a calm voice:

"Well, I will stay where I am!"

Marius' face was radiant. Fine stood as if stupefied.

Reverting herself, the flower-girl urged the necessity of the flight; she spoke of the public exposure, of the infamy of the pillory. She grew animated; she was beautiful in her anger and Philippe gazed at her with admiration.

"My pretty child," replied he, "you, perhaps, might make me yield if I had not become blind and obstinate in this cell. But, truly, I have already committed enough cowardly actions, without burdening my conscience further. Whatever Heaven ordains will take place! But all is not lost. Marius will deliver me; he will find the money, as you will see. You can come for me when you have paid my ransom. Then, we will fly together and I will embrace you."

He spoke almost gaily. Marius took his hand.

"Thank you, brother," said he. "Have confidence."

Fine and Revertgat quitted the cell. Philippe and Marius remained alone for several minutes. They had a grave and animated conversation; they talked of Blanche and her child.

When the three visitors to the cell had returned to the jailer's lodge, the flower-girl lost all hope and asked Marius what he was going to do.

"I shall make another attempt to raise the money," said he. "The trouble is that we are pressed for time and that I do not know any one to whom I can apply for a loan."

"I can aid you a little," said Revertgat. "There is in this town, a short distance from here, a banker, M. Rostand, who might be induced, perhaps, to lend you a goodly sum. But I forewarn you that this Rostand has the reputation of being a usurer."

Marius had no choice of means.

To be continued.

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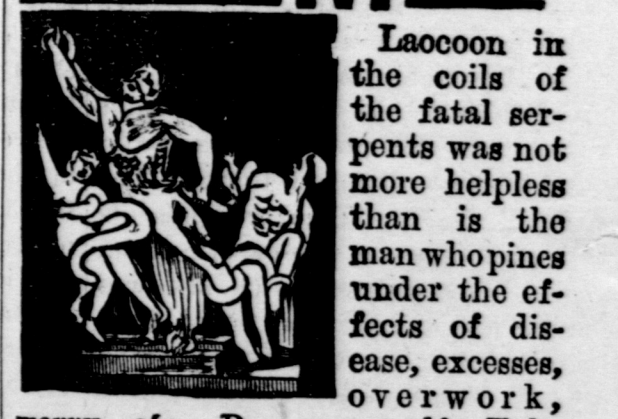
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