

FILE NO. 113.

ONE OF THE MYSTERIES OF PARIS, AND HOW IT WAS SOLVED.

BY EMILE GABORIAUX

CHAPTER XIX.

Clameran's last injunction to Raoul was: "Be very cautious when you enter the room; your appearance must tell everything, so you can avoid preliminary explanations." The recommendation was useless. The instant that Raoul went into the little salon, the sight of his pale, haggard face and wild eyes caused Mme. Faugel to spring up with clasped hands, and cry out: "Raoul, what has happened? Speak, my son!"

"The sound of her tender, affectionate voice acted like an electric shock upon the young bandit. He shook like a leaf. But, at the same time, his mind seemed to change. Louis was not mistaken in his estimate of his companion's character. Raoul was on the stage; his part was to be played; his assurance returned to him; his cheating, lying nature assumed the ascendant, and stifled any better feeling his heart." "This misfortune is the last I shall ever suffer, mother!"

"The matter is, my mother," he said, in a voice of heartbroken despair, "that I am an unworthy, degenerate son! Unworthy of you, unworthy of my noble father!" She tried to comfort him by saying that his errors were all her fault, and that he was, in spite of all, the pride of her heart.

"Alas!" he said, "I know and judge myself. No one can reproach me for my infamous conduct more bitterly than I am. My own conscience, which is not naturally wicked, but only a miserable fool. At times I am like an insane man, and am not responsible for my actions. Ah, my dear mother, I would not be what I am, if you had watched over my childhood. But brought up among strangers, with no guide but my own evil passions, nothing to restrain me, no one to advise me, no one to love me, owning nothing, not even my stolen name, I am cursed with vanity and unbounded ambition. Poor, with no one to assist me but you, I have the tastes and vices of a millionaire's son." "Alas for me! When I found you the evil was done. Your affection, your maternal love, the only true happiness of my life, could not save me. I, who had suffered so much, endured so many privations, even the pangs of hunger, became spoiled by this new life of luxury and pleasure which you opened before me. I rushed headlong into extravagance, as a drunkard long deprived of liquor seizes and drains to the dregs the first bottle in his reach."

Mme. Faugel rushed toward him, and, seizing his hand, gazed searchingly into his eyes, as if to read his very soul. "What is the matter? Raoul, my dear son, do tell me what troubles you." "The matter is, my mother," he said, in a voice of heartbroken despair, "that I am an unworthy, degenerate son! Unworthy of you, unworthy of my noble father!"

"She tried to comfort him by saying that his errors were all her fault, and that he was, in spite of all, the pride of her heart. 'Alas!' he said, 'I know and judge myself. No one can reproach me for my infamous conduct more bitterly than I am. My own conscience, which is not naturally wicked, but only a miserable fool. At times I am like an insane man, and am not responsible for my actions. Ah, my dear mother, I would not be what I am, if you had watched over my childhood. But brought up among strangers, with no guide but my own evil passions, nothing to restrain me, no one to advise me, no one to love me, owning nothing, not even my stolen name, I am cursed with vanity and unbounded ambition. Poor, with no one to assist me but you, I have the tastes and vices of a millionaire's son.'

Mme. Faugel listened, silent and terrified, to these words of despair and remorse, which Raoul uttered with vehemence. She dared not interrupt him, but felt certain some dreadful piece of news was coming. Raoul continued in a sad, hopeless tone: "Yes, I have been a weak fool. Happiness was within my reach, and I had not the sense to stretch forth my hand and grasp it. I rejected a heavenly reality to eagerly pursue a vain phantom. I, who ought to have spent my life at your feet, and daily striven to express my gratitude for your lavish kindness, have made you unhappy, destroyed your peace of mind, and instead of being a blessing, I have been a curse ever since the first fatal day you welcomed me to your kind heart. Ah, unfeeling brute that I was, to squander upon creatures whom I despised, a fortune, of which each gold piece must have cost you a tear! Too late, too late! With you, I might have been a good and happy man!"

"He stopped, as if overcome by the conviction of his evil deeds, and seemed as if about to burst into tears. 'It is never too late to repent, my son,' murmured Mme. Faugel, in comforting tones. 'Ah, if only could!' cried Raoul; 'but no; it is too late! Besides, can I tell how long my good resolutions will last? This is not the first time that I have condemned myself pitilessly. Stinging remorse for each new fault made me swear to lead a better life, to sin no more. What was the result of these periodical repentances! At the first temptation I forgot my remorse and good resolutions. I am weak and mean-spirited, and you are not firm enough to govern my vacillating nature. While my intentions are good, my actions are villainous. The disproportion between my extravagant desires, and the means of gratifying them, is too great for me to endure any longer. Who knows to what fearful length my unfortunate disposition may lead me? However, I will take my fate in my own hands!' he finally said, with a reckless laugh. 'Oh, Raoul! my dear son!' cried Mme. Faugel, in an agony of terror, 'explain these dreadful words. Am I not your mother? Tell me what distresses you; I am ready to hear the worst.'

CHAPTER XX. Pale and trembling, Raoul and Mme. Faugel passed through the banker's study, and down the narrow staircase leading to the offices and cash-room below. Raoul walked in front, holding the light, and the key of the safe.

"Even granting that some chance had revealed the secret to him, he would find but little in the safe, since everything was deposited in the Bank of France. Everyone knew that no large sum was ever kept in the safe after banking hours. 'The only anxiety she felt was, how Raoul would bear the disappointment, how she could calm his despair. She thought that she would gain time by letting Raoul try the key; and then, when he could not open the safe, he would keep his promise, and wait until the next day. There was surely no harm in letting him try the lock, when he could not touch the money.' 'When he sees there is no chance of success,' she thought, 'he will listen to my entreaties; and to-morrow—to-morrow—'

"What she would do to-morrow she knew not; she did not even ask herself. But in extreme situations the least delay inspires hope, as if a short respite meant sure salvation. The condemned man, at the last moment, begs for a reprieve of a day, an hour, a few seconds. Raoul was about to kill himself; his mother prayed to God to grant her one day, not even a day, one night; as if in this space of time some unexpected relief would come to end her misery. They reached Prosper's office, and Raoul placed the key on a high stool, so that it lighted the whole room. He then summoned up all his coolness, or rather that mechanical precision of movement, almost independent of will, of which men accustomed to peril avail themselves at times of need. Rapidly, with the dexterity of experience, he slipped the buttons on the five letters composing the name of G. I. P. S. Y. His features during this short operation, expressed the most intense anxiety. He was fearful that his nervous energy might give out; of not being able to open the safe; of not finding the money there when he opened it; of Prosper having changed the word; or perhaps having neglected to leave the money in the safe. Mme. Faugel saw these visible apprehensions with alarm. She read in his eyes that wild hope of a man, who, passionately desiring an object, ends by persuading himself that his own will suffices to overcome all obstacles. Having often been present when Prosper was preparing to leave his office, Raoul had fifty times seen him move the buttons and lock the safe, just before leaving the bank. Indeed, having a practical turn of mind, and an eye to the future, he had even tried to lock the safe himself on several occasions while waiting for Prosper."

He inserted the key softly, turned it around; pushed it further in, and turned it a second time; then thrust it in suddenly, and turned it again. His heart beat so loudly that Mme. Faugel could hear it throb. The word had not been changed; the safe opened. Raoul and his mother simultaneously uttered a cry; she of terror; he of triumph. "Shut it again!" cried Mme. Faugel, frightened at the incomprehensible result of Raoul's attempt. "Come away. Don't touch anything, for Heaven's sake!" Raoul!"

"And, half frenzied, she clung to Raoul's arm, and pulled him away so abruptly, that the key was dragged from the lock, and slipping along the greasy varnish of the safe door, made a deep scratch some inches long. But at a glance Raoul discovered, on the upper shelf of the safe, four bundles of bank notes. He snatched them up with his left hand, and slipped them inside his vest. Exhausted by the effort she had just made, Mme. Faugel dropped Raoul's arm, and almost fainting with emotion, clung to the back of a chair. "Have mercy, Raoul!" she moaned. "I implore you to put back the money, and I solemnly swear that I will give you twice as much to-morrow. Oh, my son, have pity on your unhappy mother!"

"He paid no attention to these words of entreaty, but carefully examined the scratch on the safe. He was almost alarmed at this trace of the robbery, which it was impossible for him to cover up. "At least, you will not take all," said Mme. Faugel; "just keep enough to save yourself, and put back the rest." "What good would that do? The discovery will be made that the safe has been opened; so I might as well take all as a part." "Oh, no! not at all. I can account to Andre; I will tell him I had a pressing need for a certain sum, and opened the safe to get it." In the meantime Raoul had carefully closed the safe. "Come, mother, let us go back to the sitting-room. A servant might go there to look for you, and be astonished at our absence." Raoul's cruel indifference and cold calculation at such a moment filled Mme. Faugel with indignation. She saw that she had no influence over her son, that her prayers and tears had no effect upon his hard heart. "Let them come here and find us. I will be relieved to put an end to this tissue of crime. Then Andre will know all, and drive me from his house. Let come what will, I shall not sacrifice another victim. Prosper will be accused of this theft to-morrow. Clameran defrauded him of the woman he loved, and now you would deprive him of his honor! I will have nothing to do with so base a crime."

She spoke so loud and angrily that Raoul was alarmed. He knew that the errand boy slept in a room close by, and might be in bed listening to her, although it was early in the evening. "Come upstairs," he said, seizing Mme. Faugel's arm. But she clung to a table, and refused to move a step. "I have been cowardly enough to sacrifice Madeleine," she said, "but I will not ruin Prosper."

"Raoul reflected that to commit a crime, and not profit by it, would be the height of absurdity. He had come with the intention of breaking off all connection with Clameran; but he now determined that he would not abandon his accomplice until he had been well paid for his services. "Very well," he said, "I accept this on account; but, remember, I will never do another piece of work like this of to-night. You can do what you please; I shall flatly refuse." Clameran burst into a loud laugh, and said: "That is sensible; now that you are rich, you can afford to be honest. Set your conscience at rest, for I promise you I will require nothing more of you save a few trifling services. You can retire behind the scenes now, while I appear upon the stage. My role begins."

CHAPTER XXI. For more than an hour after Raoul's departure, Mme. Faugel remained in a state of stupor bordering upon unconsciousness. Gradually, however, she recovered her senses sufficiently to comprehend the horrors of her present situation; and, with the faculty of thought that of suffering returned. The dreadful scene in which she had taken part was still before her affrighted vision; all the attending circumstances, unnoticed at the time, now struck her forcibly. She saw that she had been the dupe of a shameful conspiracy; that Raoul had tortured her with cold-blooded cruelty, had taken advantage of her tenderness, and had speculated upon her fright. But had Prosper anything to do with the robbery? This Mme. Faugel had no way of finding. Ah! Raoul knew how the blow would strike when he accused Prosper. He knew that Mme. Faugel would end by believing in the cashier's complicity. The unhappy woman sat and thought over every possible way in which Raoul could find out the secret word without Prosper's knowledge. She rejected with horror the idea that the cashier was the instigator of the crime; but in spite of herself, it constantly recurred, and finally she felt convinced that what Raoul said must be true; for who but Prosper could have betrayed the word? and who but Prosper could have left so large a sum of money in the safe, which, by order of the banker, was to be always left empty at night?

Knowing that Prosper was leading a life of extravagance and dissipation, she thought it very likely he had, from sheer desperation, resorted to this bold step to pay his debts; her blind affection, moreover, made her blind affection, moreover, made her blind to attribute the crime to any one rather than to her darling son. She had heard that Prosper was supporting one of those worthless creatures whose extravagance impoverishes men, and whose evil influence perverts their natures. When a young man is thus degraded, will he stop at any sin or crime? Alas! Mme. Faugel knew, from her own sad experience, to what depths even one fault can lead. Although she believed Prosper guilty, she did not blame him, but considered herself responsible for his sins. Had she not herself banished the poor young man from a fireless which he had begun to regard as his own? Had she not destroyed his hopes and happiness by crushing his pure love for a noble girl, whom he looked upon as his future wife, and thus driven him into a life of dissipation and sin? She was undecided whether to confide in Madeleine or bury the secret in her own breast. Fatally inspired, she decided to keep silent. When Madeleine returned home at 11 o'clock, Mme. Faugel not only was silent as to what had occurred, but even succeeded in so concealing all traces of her agitation, that she escaped any questions from her niece. Her calmness never left her when M. Faugel and Lucien returned, although she was in terror lest her husband should go down to the cash-room to see that everything was safely locked up. It was not his habit to open the money safe at night, but he sometimes did so. As fate would have it, the banker, as soon as he entered the room began to speak of Prosper, saying how distressing it was that so interesting a young man should be thus throwing himself away, and wondering what could have happened to make him suddenly cease his visits at the house, and resort to sad company. If M. Faugel had looked at the faces of his wife and niece while he harshly blamed the cashier, he would have been puzzled at their strange expressions.

All night long Mme. Faugel suffered the most intolerable agony. She counted each stroke of the town clock as the hours dragged on. "In six hours," she said to herself, "in five hours—in four hours—in three hours—in one hour—and all will be discovered; and then what will happen? Heaven help me!" At sunrise she heard the servants moving about the house; then the office shutters opened; then, later, she heard the clerks going into the bank. She attempted to get up, but felt so ill and weak, that she sunk back on her pillow; and lying there, trembling like a leaf, bathed in cold perspiration, she awaited the discovery of the robbery. She was leaning over the side of the bed, straining her ear to catch a sound from the cash-room, when Madeleine, who had just left her, rushed into the room. The white face and wild eyes of the poor girl told Mme. Faugel that the crime was discovered. "Do you know what has happened, aunt?" cried Madeleine, in a shrill, horrified tone. "Prosper is accused of robbery, and the police have come to take him to prison!" A groan was Mme. Faugel's only answer. "Raoul or the marquis is at the bottom of this," continued Madeleine, excitedly. "How can they be concerned in it, my child?"

"I can't tell yet; but I only know that Prosper is innocent. I have just seen him, spoken to him. He would never have looked me in the face had he been guilty." Mme. Faugel opened her lips to confess all; but fear kept her silent. "What can these wretches want?" said Madeleine; "what new sacrifice do they demand? Dishonor Prosper! Good heavens! why did they not kill him at once? He would rather be dead than disgraced!" Here the entrance of M. Faugel interrupted Madeleine. The banker was so angry that he could scarcely speak. "The worthless scoundrel!" he cried; "to think of his daring to accuse me! to insinuate that I robbed my own safe! And that Marquis de Clameran must needs doubt my good faith in keeping my engagement to pay his money!" Then, without noticing the effect of his story upon the two women, he proceeded to relate all that had occurred downstairs. "I was afraid this extravagance would lead to something terrible," he said, in conclusion; "you know I told you last night that Prosper was growing worse in his conduct, and that he would get into trouble." Throughout the day Madeleine's devotion to her aunt was severely tried. The generous girl saw disgrace heaped upon the man she loved. She had perfect faith in his innocence; she felt sure she knew who had laid the trap to ruin him; and yet she could not say a word in his defense. Fearing that Madeleine would suspect her of complicity in the theft, if she remained in bed and displayed so much agitation, Mme. Faugel arose and dressed for breakfast. It was a dreary meal. No one fasted a morsel. The servants moved about on their tiptoes, as silently as if a death had occurred in the family. About two o'clock a servant came to M. Faugel's study, and said that the Marquis de Clameran desired to see him. "What!" cried the banker, "does he dare to—?" Then, after a moment's reflection, he added: "Ask him to walk up."

The very name of Clameran had sufficed to arouse all the slumbering wrath of M. Faugel. The victim of a robbery, finding his safe empty at the moment that he was called upon to make a heavy payment, he had been constrained to conceal his anger and resentment, but now he determined to have his revenge upon his insolent visitor!

"You will excuse me, ladies, for intruding at this time of your affliction; but I have a duty to fulfill." The two women were silent. They seemed to be waiting for him to explain. He added in an undertone: "I know all." By an imploring gesture Mme. Faugel tried to stop him. She saw that he was about to reveal her secret to Madeleine. But Louis would not see this gesture. He turned his whole attention to Madeleine, who haughtily said: "Explain yourself, Monsieur." "Only one hour ago," he replied, "I discovered that Raoul last night forced from his mother the key of the money safe, and stole 350,000 francs." Madeleine crimsoned with shame and indignation. She leaned over the sofa, and seizing her aunt's wrist shook it violently, and in a hollow voice cried: "It is false, is it not, aunt? Speak!" "Alas!" groaned Mme. Faugel. "What have I done?" "You have allowed Prosper to be accused," cried Madeleine. "You have suffered him to be arrested and disgraced for life." "Forgive me!" sighed Mme. Faugel. "He was about to kill himself; I was so frightened! Then, you know—Prosper was to share the money; he gave Raoul the secret word—"

"Good heaven! Aunt, how could you believe such a falsehood as that?" Clameran interrupted them. "Unfortunately, what your aunt says of M. Bertomy is the truth," he said, in a sad tone. "Your proofs, Monsieur; where are your proofs?" "Raoul's confession." "Raoul is false." "That is only too true; but how did he find out the word, if M. Bertomy did not reveal it? And who left the money in the safe but M. Bertomy?" These arguments had no effect upon Madeleine. "And now tell me," she said, scornfully, "what became of the money?" There was no mistaking the significance of these words. They meant: "You are the instigator of the robbery, and, of course, have possession of the money."

This harsh accusation from a girl whom he so passionately loved, when grasping Raoul, as he was, he gave up for her sake all the money gained by his crime, so cruelly hurt Clameran that he turned livid. But his mortification and anger did not prevent him from pursuing the part he had prepared and studied. "A day will come, Mademoiselle," he said, "when you will deeply regret having treated me so cruelly. I understand your insinuation; you need not attempt to deny it." "I have no idea of denying anything, Monsieur." "Madeleine!" remonstrated Mme. Faugel, who trembled at the rising anger of the man, who held her fate in her hands. "Madeleine, be careful!" "Mademoiselle is pitiless," said Clameran, sadly. "She cruelly punishes an honorable man whose only fault is having obeyed his brother's dying injunctions. And I am here now, because I believe in the joint responsibility of all the members of the family."

Here he slowly drew from his pocket several bundles of bank notes, and laid them on the mantelpiece. "Raoul stole 350,000 francs," he said. "I return the same amount. It is more than half my fortune. Willingly would I give the rest to insure this being the last crime committed by him." Too inexperienced to penetrate this bold, yet simple, plan of Clameran's, Madeleine was dumb with astonishment; all her calculations were upset. Mme. Faugel, on the contrary, accepted this restitution as salvation sent from Heaven. "Oh, thanks, Monsieur; thanks!" she cried, gratefully, clasping Clameran's hand in hers. "You are goodness itself!" Louis' eye lit up with pleasure. But he rejoiced too soon. A minute's reflection brought back all of Madeleine's distrust. She thought this magnanimity and generosity unnatural in a man whom she considered incapable of a noble sentiment, and at once concluded that it must conceal some snare beneath.

"What are we to do with this money?" she demanded. "Restore it to M. Faugel, Mademoiselle." "We restore it, Monsieur, and how? Restoring the money is denouncing Raoul, and ruining my aunt. Take back your money, Monsieur. We will not touch it." Clameran was too shrewd to insist; he took up the money and prepared to leave. "I comprehend your refusal, Mademoiselle, and must find another way of accomplishing my wish. But, before retiring, let me say that your injustice pains me deeply. After the promise you made to me, I had reason to hope for a kinder welcome." "I will keep my promise, Monsieur; but not until you have furnished security." "Security! and for what? Pray explain yourself." "Something to protect my aunt against the molestations of Raoul after my marriage. What is to prevent his coming to extort money from his mother after he has squandered my dowry? A man who spends a hundred thousand francs in four months will soon run through my little fortune. We are making a bargain; I give you my hand in exchange for the honor and life of my aunt; and, of course, you must give me some guaranty to secure the performance of your promise."