

Secret of the Plundered Safe

By EMILE GABORIAU

CHAPTER XVII.—(Continued.)

The clown thought that at last he had hit the mark. Mme. Fauvel began to betray signs of agitation. Once she made an attempt to rise from the chair, but it seemed as if her strength failed her, and she sank back, forced to listen to the end.

"Finally, ladies and gentlemen," continued the clown, "the richly stored jewel cases became empty. The day came when the mandarin had nothing more to give. It was then that the young scoundrel conceived the project of carrying off the Jasper button belonging to the Mandarin Li-Fo, which was kept in a granite chest. Ah! the mandarin resisted a long time. But her lover besought her so tenderly that she finally yielded to his entreaties; and—the Jasper button was stolen. The fourth picture represents the guilty couple, stealthily creeping down the private stairway; see their frightened look—"

He abruptly stopped. Three or four of his auditors rushed to the assistance of Mme. Fauvel, who seemed about to faint, and at the same time he felt his arm roughly seized by some one behind him. He turned round and faced De Clameran and Lagors, both of whom were pale with anger.

"What do you want, gentlemen?" he inquired, politely.

"To speak to you," they both answered.

He followed them to the end of the picture gallery, near a window opening in a balcony.

The sudden faintness of Mme. Fauvel had passed off unnoticed save by a few, who attributed it to the heat of the room. M. Fauvel had been sent for, but when he came hurrying in, he found his wife comelyly talking to Madeleine.

Not having as much control over his temper as Raoul, M. de Clameran angrily said:

"In the first place, monsieur, I would like to know who you are."

"You want my passport, do you, my lord Joge? I left it in the hands of the city authorities; it contains my name, age, profession, domicile and every detail—"

"You have just committed a gross insult! What do you mean by telling this abominable story in this house?"

"Abominable! You may call it abominable, but I, who composed it, have a different opinion of it."

"Enough, monsieur; you will at least have the courage to acknowledge that your performance was a vile insinuation against M. Fauvel?"

"Bless my heart!" cried the clown, as if speaking to himself. "This is the strangest thing I ever heard of. How can my drama of the Mandarin Li-Fo have any reference to M. Fauvel, whom I don't know from Adam or Eve?"

"Do you pretend," said M. de Clameran, "to be ignorant of M. Fauvel's misfortune?"

"Ah, yes, yes, I remember. His cashier ran off with three hundred and fifty thousand francs. Pshaw! It is a thing that almost daily happens. But as to discovering any connection between this robbery and my play, that is another matter. If, unintentionally, I have offended the wife of a man whom I highly esteem, it is his business to seek redress. Perhaps you will tell me he is too old to demand satisfaction; if so, let him send one of his sons. You asked me who I am; in return I ask you who you are—who undertakes to act as Madame Fauvel's champion? Are you her relative, friend or ally? What right have you to insult her by pretending to discover an allusion to her in a play invented for amusement?"

There was nothing to be said in reply to this. M. de Clameran sought a means of escape.

"I am a friend of M. Fauvel," he said, "and this title gives me the right to be as jealous of his reputation as if it were my own. If this is not a sufficient reason for my interference, I must inform you that his family will shortly be mine; I regard myself as his nephew. Next week, monsieur, my marriage with Mlle. Madeleine will be publicly announced."

This news was so unexpected, so startling, that for a moment the clown was dumb; and now his surprise was genuine. But he soon recovered himself, and, bowing with deference, said, with covert irony:

"Permit me to offer my congratulations, monsieur. Besides, being the belle to-night, Mlle. Madeleine is worth, I hear, half a million."

Raoul de Lagors had anxiously been watching the people near them, to see if they overheard this conversation.

"We have had enough of this gossip," he said, in a disdainful tone; "I will only say one thing more, Master Clown, and that is that your tongue is too long."

"Perhaps it is, my pretty youth, perhaps it is; but my arm is still longer."

De Clameran here interrupted them by saying:

"It is impossible for one to seek an explanation from a man who conceals his identity under the guise of a fool."

"You are at liberty, my lord Joge, to ask the master of the house who I am—if you dare."

The clown stood by with a sardonic smile, and after a moment's silence stared Clameran steadily in the face, and in measured tones said:

"I was the best friend, monsieur, that your dead cousin ever had. I was his adviser, and the confidant of his last wishes."

These few words fell like a clap of thunder upon De Clameran. He turned deadly pale, and started back with his

hands stretched out before him, as if shrinking from a phantom. He tried to answer, to protest against this assertion, but the words froze on his lips. His fright was pitiable.

"Come, let us go," said Lagors, who was perfectly cool.

And he dragged Clameran away, half supporting him, for he staggered like a drunken man, and clung to every object he passed, to prevent falling.

"Hello!" exclaimed the clown.

He himself was almost as much astonished as the ironmaster, and remained rooted to the spot, watching the latter as he slowly left the room.

"What can this mean?" he murmured. "Why was he so frightened? What terrible memory have I awakened in his base soul?"

The clown threw aside his banner, and started in pursuit of Mme. Fauvel. He found her sitting on a sofa in the large saloon, engaged in an animated conversation with Madeleine.

"Of course they are talking over the scene, but I have nothing more to do here," he murmured; "I might as well go, too."

He completely covered his dress with a domino, and started for home, thinking the cold, frosty air would cool his confused brain.

CHAPTER XVIII.

The clown walked up the Rue St. Lazare and struck into the Faubourg Montmartre. A man suddenly started out from a place of concealment, and rushed upon him with a dagger.

Fortunately the clown had a cat-like instinct, which enabled him to protect himself against immediate danger. He saw, or rather divined, the man crouching in the dark shadow of a house, and had the presence of mind to strike an attitude which enabled him to ward off the assassin by spreading out his arms before him.

This movement certainly saved his life, for he received in his arm a furious stab which would have instantly killed him had it penetrated his breast. Anger more than pain made him cry out:

"Ah, you villain!"

And receding a few feet he put himself on the defensive. But the precaution was useless. Seeing his blow miss, the assassin did not return to the attack, but made rapidly off.

"That was certainly Lagors," said the clown, "and Clameran must be somewhere near. While I walked around one side of the church they must have gone the other and lain in wait for me."

His wound began to pain him; he stood under a gas lamp to examine it. It did not appear to be dangerous, but the arm was cut through to the bone. He tore his handkerchief into four bands, and tied his arm up with the dexterity of a surgeon.

"I must be on the track of some great crime, since these fellows are resolved upon murder. When such cunning rogues are only in danger of the police court they do not gratuitously risk the chance of being tried for murder."

He thought by enduring a great deal of pain he might still use his arm, so he started in pursuit of his enemy, taking care to keep in the middle of the road, and avoid all dark corners. Although he saw no one, he was convinced that he was being pursued. He was not mistaken. When he reached the Boulevard Montmartre he crossed the street, and as he did so distinguished two shadows which he recognized.

He walked rapidly on, abruptly stopped, and asked some significant questions of two policemen who were standing talking together. The maneuver had the result he expected: Raoul and Clameran stood perfectly still about twenty steps off, not daring to advance.

Twenty steps! That was as much start as the clown wanted. While talking with the police he had pulled the bell of the door before which they were standing and the click of the lifted latch apprised him that the door was open. He bowed and entered the house.

A minute later the police had passed on, and Raoul and Clameran in their turn rang the bell. When the janitor appeared they asked who it was that had just gone in disguised as a clown.

They were told that no such person had entered, and that none of the lodgers had gone out disguised that night.

"However," added the janitor, "I am not very sure, for this house has a back door which opens on the Rue St. Denis."

"We are tricked," interrupted Lagors, "and will never know who the clown is."

"Unless we learn it too soon for our own good," said Clameran, musingly.

While Lagors and Clameran were anxiously trying to devise some means of discovering the clown's identity Verduret hurried up the back street, and reached the Archangel as the clock struck three. Prosper, who was watching from his window, saw him in the distance, and ran down to open the door for him.

"What have you learned?" he said. "What did you find out? Did you see Madeleine? Were Raoul and Clameran at the ball?"

But M. Verduret was not in the habit of discussing private affairs where he might be overheard.

"First of all, let us go into your room, and get some water to wash this cut, which burns like fire. It is a little mark of your friend Raoul. Ah, I will soon teach him the danger of a man's arm!"

Prosper was surprised at the look of merciless rage on his friend's face as he calmly washed and dressed his arm.

"Now, Prosper, we will talk as much as you please. Our enemies are on the

alert, and we must crush them instantly, or not at all. I have made a mistake, I have been on the wrong track; it is an accident liable to happen to any man, no matter how intelligent he may be. I took the effect for the cause. The day I was convinced that a secret existed between Raoul and Mme. Fauvel I thought I held the end of the thread that must lead us to the truth. I should have been more mistrustful; this solution was too simple, too natural. The robbery, my friend, has now become a secondary detail. It is easily explained, and it that were all to be accounted for I would say to you, 'My task is done, let us go ask for a warrant of arrest.'"

"Ah, you know—is it possible?"

"Yes, I know who gave the key, and I know who told the secret word."

"The key must have been M. Fauvel's. But the word—"

"The word you were foolish enough to give. You have forgotten, I suppose. But unfortunately Gypsy remembered. You know that, two days before the robbery, you took Lagors and two other friends to sup with Madame Gypsy? Nina was sad, and reproached you for not being more cheerful."

"Yes, I remember that."

"But do you remember what you replied to her? Well, I will tell you; 'Nina, you are unjust in reproaching me, for at this very moment your name guards M. Fauvel's safe.'"

The truth suddenly burst upon Prosper like a thunderclap. He wrung his hands despairingly, and cried:

"Yes, oh, yes! I remember now."

"Then you can easily understand the rest. One of the scoundrels went to Mme. Fauvel, and compelled her to give up her husband's key; then, at a venture, placed the movable buttons on the name of Gypsy, opened the safe, and took the three hundred and fifty thousand francs. And Mme. Fauvel must have been terribly frightened before she yielded. The day after the robbery the poor woman was near dying, and it was she who, at the greatest risk, sent you the ten thousand francs."

"But which was the thief, Raoul or Clameran? What enables them to thus tyrannize over Mme. Fauvel? And how does Madeleine come to be mixed up in the affair?"

"These questions, my dear Prosper, I cannot yet answer, therefore, I postpone being the judge. I only ask you to wait ten days, and if I cannot in that time discover the solution of this mystery I will return and go with you to report to M. Patriget all that we know."

"Are you going to leave the city?"

"In another hour I shall be on the road to Beaupre. It was from that neighborhood that Clameran came, as well as Mme. Fauvel, who was a Mlle. de la Verberie before marrying."

"Yes, I know both families."

"I must go there to study them. Neither Raoul nor Clameran can escape during my absence. The police are watching them. But you, Prosper, must be prudent. Promise me to remain a prisoner here during my trip."

All that M. Verduret asked Prosper willingly promised. But he did not wish to be left in complete ignorance of his projects for the future, or of his motives in the past.

"Will you not tell me, monsieur, who you are, and what reasons you have for coming to my rescue?"

The extraordinary man smiled sadly, and said:

"I will tell you, in the presence of Nina, on the day before your marriage with Madeleine."

Once left to his own reflections Prosper began to appreciate the powerful assistance rendered by his friend. He had the good sense to follow the recommendations of his mentor. He remained shut up in the Archangel, not even appearing at the windows.

On the ninth day of his voluntary seclusion Prosper began to feel restless and at 10 o'clock at night set forth to take a walk, thinking the fresh air would relieve the headache which had kept him awake the previous night.

Having reached the Orleans railway station, he went into a cafe near by, picked up the Soleil, and under the head of "Fashionable Gossip" read the following:

"We understand that the niece of one of our most prominent bankers, M. Fauvel, will be shortly married to the Marquis Louis de Clameran. The engagement has been announced."

He called for pen and paper, and, forgetting that no situation can excuse the mean cowardice of an anonymous letter, wrote in a disguised hand the following lines to M. Fauvel:

"Dear Sir—You have consigned your cashier to prison; you acted prudently, since you were convinced of his dishonesty and faithlessness. But even if he stole money from your safe, does it follow that he also stole Mme. Fauvel's diamonds and pawned them at the Mont-de-Piété, where they are now."

"Moreover, I would, before signing the marriage contract of Mlle. Madeleine, inquire at the Prefecture of Police and obtain some information concerning the noble Marquis de Clameran."

"A FRIEND."

Prosper hastened off to post his letter. Fearing that it would not reach M. Fauvel in time, he put it in the main letter box, so as to be certain of its speedy delivery. At that very hour M. Verduret was taking his seat in the cars at Tarascon, meditating upon the most advantageous plan to be adopted in pursuance of his discoveries.

For he had discovered everything, and now must bring matters to a crisis. As he had predicted, he had been compelled to search into the distant past for the first causes of the crime of which Prosper had been the victim.

The following is the drama, as he wrote it out for the benefit of the judge of instruction, knowing that it would contain grounds for an indictment against the malefactors:

(To be continued.)

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The Girth of Man Increasing.

An excellent illustration of the value of records has been afforded lately regarding the question of physical degeneracy. A firm in the north of England has compared the measurements for clothing made two generations ago with those of today, the results going to show that chest and hip measurements are now three inches on the average more than they were sixty years ago. The same conclusion is reached by the experience of the ready-made clothiers. These facts, whatever may be their generality, do not quite dispose of the question of degeneracy. They are what we should expect from the more abundant and cheaper food of the people, their better housing and improved sanitary surroundings; but the testimony regarding the unfitness of recruits and progressive lack of stamina in town, and especially manufacturing, populations cannot be disregarded. The girth of man may be increasing, but like a fattening hog, is not corpulence bringing clumsiness?

Other men's sins are before our eyes; our own are behind our back.—Seneca.

Cured Her Rheumatism.

Deep Valley, Pa., Oct. 31 (Special)—There is deep interest in Green county over the cure of the little daughter of I. N. Whiskey of Rheumatism. She was a great sufferer for five or six years and nothing seemed to do her any good till she tried Dodd's Kidney Pills. She began to improve almost at once and now she is cured and can run and play as other children do. Mr. Whiskey, says:

"I am indeed thankful for what Dodd's Kidney Pills have done for my daughter; they saved her from being a cripple perhaps for life."

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A Village of Smiths.

Near Tripoli, in North Africa, is a village called Amrus, the like of which is not to be found in any other part of the world. The place is inhabited exclusively by those exercising the calling of smith.

From early morning till the last thing at night they are hard at work, the aged members of the community also taking part. Those no longer able to handle the hammer occupy themselves by blowing the bellows.

The majority of the people are armors, who supply the Arabs with weapons indispensable to the sons of the desert, who are too indolent to make for themselves. These weapons are exported as far as the Niger, where they are in great demand.

He who loses money loses much; he who loses a friend loses more, but he who loses his spirits loses all.