

## Secret of the Plundered Safe

By EMILE GABORIAU

### CHAPTER XXIV.

An hour later Mme. Fauvel ordered her carriage, and went out. M. Fauvel jumped into a hackney coach and followed her.

"Heaven grant that M. Verduret may reach there in time!" cried Nina to herself, "otherwise Mme. Fauvel and Raoul are lost."

Mme. Fauvel hastened to Vesinet, convinced that some new misfortune was in store for her. Her alarm was groundless. She found Raoul more tender and affectionate than he had ever been. He saw the necessity of reassuring her, and winning his old place in her forgiving heart, before making his disclosures. He succeeded. The poor lady had a smiling and happy air as she sat in an armchair, with Raoul kneeling before her.

"I have distressed you too long, my dear mother," he said, in his softest tones, "but I repeat sincerely; now listen to me."

He had not time to say more; the door was violently thrown open, and Raoul, springing to his feet, was confronted by M. Verduret. The banker had a revolver in his hand, and was deadly pale. It was evident that he was making superhuman efforts to remain calm, like a judge whose duty it is to justify punish crime.

"Ah," he said, with a horrible laugh, "you look surprised. You did not expect me? You thought that my imbecile credulity insured your safety."

Raoul had the courage to place himself before Mme. Fauvel, and to stand prepared to receive the expected bullet.

"I assure you, uncle—" he began.

"Enough!" interrupted the banker, with an angry gesture, "let me hear no more infamous falsehoods! End this acting, of which I am no longer the dupe."

"I swear to you—"

"Spare yourself the trouble of denying anything. I know all. I know who pawned my wife's diamonds. I know who committed the robbery for which an innocent man was arrested and imprisoned."

Mme. Fauvel, white with terror, fell upon her knees. At last it had come—the dreadful day had come. Vainly had she sacrificed herself and others; all was discovered. She saw that all was lost, and wringing her hands, she tearfully moaned:

"Pardon, Andre! I beg you, forgive me!"

At these heart-broken tones the banker shook like a leaf. The memory of his lost happiness was too much for the stricken man. He forgot the present in the past, and was almost melted to forgetfulness.

"Unhappy woman!" he murmured, "unhappy woman!"

For some moments nothing was heard but the sobs of Mme. Fauvel.

"I came here," continued the banker, "with the intention of killing you both. But I cannot kill a woman, and I will not kill an unarmed man. Defend yourself!" cried the banker, raising his arm, "if you do not—"

But the horror of the scene was too much for Mme. Fauvel to witness any longer without interposing. She understood but one thing—her son and her husband were about to kill each other before her very eyes. Rushing up to Raoul, she threw her arms around him, and said to her husband:

"Kill me, and me alone!"

At these words M. Fauvel glared at the guilty pair, and deliberately taking aim fired. Neither Raoul nor Mme. Fauvel moved. The banker fired a second time, then a third.

He cocked the pistol for a fourth shot, when a man rushed into the room, snatched the pistol from the banker's hand, and, throwing him on the sofa, ran toward Mme. Fauvel. This man was M. Verduret, who had been warned by Cavillon, but did not know that Mme. Gypsy had extracted the balls from M. Fauvel's revolver.

"Thank heaven!" he cried, "she is unhurt."

"How dare you interfere?" cried the banker, who by this time had joined the group. "The villain shall die!"

M. Verduret seized the banker's wrists in a vice-like grasp, and whispered in his ear:

"Thank heaven, you are saved from committing a terrible crime; the anonymous letter deceived you. Do you know who that man is that you attempted to kill? Her son."

The words of this stranger, showing his intimate knowledge of the private affairs of all present, seemed to confound and frighten Raoul more than M. Fauvel's threats had done. Yet he had sufficient presence of mind to say:

"It is the truth!"

The banker looked wildly from Raoul to M. Verduret; then, fastening his haggard eyes on his wife, exclaimed:

"It is false! You are all conspiring to deceive me! Proofs!"

"You shall have proofs," replied M. Verduret, "but first listen."

And rapidly, with his wonderful talent for explanation, he related the principal points of the plot he had discovered. The true state of the case was terribly distressing to M. Fauvel, but nothing compared with what he had suspected.

His throbbing, yearning heart told him that he still loved his wife. Why should he punish a mistake committed so many years ago and stoned for by twenty years of devotion and suffering? For some moments after M. Verduret had finished his explanation M. Fauvel remained silent.

So many strange events had happened, rapidly following each other in succession, and culminating in the shocking scene which had just taken place, that M. Fauvel seemed to be too bewildered to think clearly. But the sight of Raoul froze the words upon his lips.

"So this is your son," he said to his wife—"this man, who has plundered you and robbed me!"

Mme. Fauvel was unable to utter a word in reply to these reproachful words.

"Oh!" said M. Verduret, "madam will tell you that this young man is the son of Gaston de Clameran; she has never doubted it. But the truth is—"

"What?"

"That in order to swindle her he has

perpetrated a gross imposture."

### CHAPTER XXV.

Raoul had been quietly creeping toward the door, hoping to escape while no one was thinking of him. But M. Verduret was watching him out of the corner of one eye, and stopped him just as he was about leaving the room.

"Not so fast, my pretty youth," he said, dragging him into the middle of the room; "it is not polite to leave us so unceremoniously. Let us finish the story. Clameran hastened to London. He had no difficulty in finding the farmer's wife whom the old countess had intrusted Gaston's son. But here an unexpected disappointment greeted him. He learned that the child, whose name was registered on the parish books as Raoul Valentine Wilson, had died of the croup when eighteen months old."

"Did any one state such a fact as that?" interrupted Raoul; "it is false!"

"It was not only stated, but proved, my pretty youth," replied M. Verduret. "You don't suppose I am a man to trust to oral testimony, do you?"

He drew from his pocket several officially stamped documents, with red seals attached, and laid them on the table.

"These are the declarations of the nurse, her husband, and four witnesses. Here is an extract from the register of births; this is a certificate of registry of his death; and all these are authenticated at the French embassy. Now are you satisfied, young man?"

"What next?" inquired M. Fauvel.

"The next step was this," replied M. Verduret. "Clameran, finding that the child was dead, supposed that he could, in spite of this disappointment, obtain money from Mme. Fauvel; he was mistaken. His first attempt failed. Having an inventive turn of mind, he determined that the child should come to life. Among his large circle of rascally acquaintances he selected a young fellow to personate Raoul Valentine Wilson; and the chosen one stands before you."

"What next?" inquired M. Fauvel.

"The next step was this," replied M. Verduret. "M. Verduret took the physician aside, and questioned him about the maniac.

"The wretched man is in hopeless state," replied the doctor; "this species of insanity is incurable. He thinks some one is trying to poison him, and nothing will persuade him to eat or drink anything; and, as it is impossible to force anything down his throat he will die of starvation, after having suffered all the tortures of poison."

M. Verduret, with a shudder, turned to leave the prefecture, saying to Fanfrelot:

"Mine. Fauvel is saved!"

### CHAPTER XXVI.

Four days had passed since the events just narrated, when one morning, M. Lecoq—the official Lecoq, who resembled the dignified head of a bureau—was walking up and down his private office, at each turn nervously looking at the clock, which slowly ticked on the mantel, as if it had no intention of striking any sooner than usual, to gratify the man so anxiously watching its placid face.

At last, however, the clock did strike, and just then the faithful Janquin opened the door, and ushered in Mme. Nina and Prosper Bertomy.

"Ah," said M. Lecoq, "you are punctual."

"M. Verduret gave us express orders to meet here in your office this morning, and we have obeyed," said Madame Gypsy.

"Very good," said the celebrated detective. "Then be kind enough to wait a few minutes; I will tell him you are here."

During the quarter of an hour that Nina and Prosper remained alone together, they did not exchange a word. Finally a door opened and M. Verduret appeared.

Nina and Prosper eagerly started toward him, but he checked them by one of those peculiar looks which no one ever dared resist.

"You have come," he said, severely.

"To hear the secret of my conduct. I have promised, and will keep my word, however painful it may be to my feelings. Listen then. My best friend is a loyal, honest man, named Caldas. Eighteen months ago this friend was the happiest of men. Infatuated by a woman, he lived for her alone, and, fool that he was, imagined that she felt the same love for him."

"She did!" cried Gypsy; "yes, she always loved him."

"She showed her love in a peculiar way. She loved him so much that one fine day she discarded him. In his first moments of despair Caldas wished to kill himself. Then he reflected that it would be wiser to live and avenge himself."

"And then?" faltered Prosper.

"Then Caldas avenged himself in his own way. He made the woman who deserted him recognize his immense superiority. Weak, timid and helpless, her cousin was disgraced, and was falling over the verge of a precipice, when the powerful hand of Caldas reached forth and saved him. You understand all now, do you not? The woman is Nina, and Caldas is—"

"Caldas!" cried Nina.

"No, not Caldas, nor Verduret, any longer; but Lecoq, the detective."

M. Lecoq broke the stupefied silence of his listeners by saying to Prosper:

"It is not to me alone that you owe your salvation. A noble girl confided to me the difficult task of clearing your reputation. I promised her that M. Fauvel should never know the secrets concerning his domestic happiness. Your letter thwarted all my plans, and I find it impossible for me to keep my promise. I have nothing more to say."

He turned to leave the room, but Nina barred his exit.

"Caldas," she murmured, "I implore you to have pity on me! I am so miserable! Ah, if you only knew! Do you give to one who has always loved you. Caldas! Listen!"

• • • • •

One month later was celebrated at the church of Notre Dame the marriage of M. Prosper Bertomy and Mme. Madeline Fauvel.

The banking house is still in the Rue de Provence, but as M. Fauvel has decided to retire from business and live in the country, the name of the firm

"If it should be Clameran!" thought M. Verduret; "If terror has deranged that brain, so capable of working out great crimes! Fate must have interposed."

While thus talking to himself he elbowed his way through the crowded court yard of the hotel. At the foot of the staircase he found M. Fanfrelot and three peculiar looking individuals, standing together, as if waiting for some one.

"Well," cried M. Verduret, "what is the matter?"

With laudable emulation the four men rushed forward to report to their superior officer.

"The matter is this, patron," said Fanfrelot, dejectedly. "I am doomed to ill luck. You see how it is; this is the only chance I ever had of working out a beautiful case, and, pat! my criminal must go and fizzle! A regular case of bankruptcy!"

"Then it is Clameran who—"

"Of course it is. When the rascal saw me this morning he scurried off like a hare. You should have seen him run! I thought he would never stop this side of Irvy; but not at all. On reaching the Boulevard des Ecoles a sudden idea seemed to strike him, and he made a bee line for his hotel. I suppose to get his pile of money. Directly he gets there what does he see? these three friends of mine. The sight of these gentlemen had the effect of a sunstroke upon him; he went raving mad on the spot. The idea of serving me such a low trick at the very moment I was sure of success—"

"Where is he now?"

"At the prefecture, I suppose. Some policeman handcuffed him, and drove off with him in a cab."

"Come with me."

M. Verduret and Fanfrelot found Clameran in one of the private cells reserved for dangerous prisoners. He had on a strait-jacket, and was struggling violently against three men, who were striving to hold him, while a physician tried to force him to swallow a potion.

"Help!" he shrieked; "help! Do you not see my cousin coming after me? Look! He wants to poison me!"

M. Verduret took the physician aside, and questioned him about the maniac.

"The wretched man is in hopeless state," replied the doctor; "this species of insanity is incurable. He thinks some one is trying to poison him, and nothing will persuade him to eat or drink anything; and, as it is impossible to force anything down his throat he will die of starvation, after having suffered all the tortures of poison."

M. Verduret, with a shudder, turned to leave the prefecture, saying to Fanfrelot:

"Mine. Fauvel is saved!"

M. Verduret took the physician aside, and questioned him about the maniac.

"The wretched man is in hopeless state," replied the doctor; "this species of insanity is incurable. He thinks some one is trying to poison him, and nothing will persuade him to eat or drink anything; and, as it is impossible to force anything down his throat he will die of starvation, after having suffered all the tortures of poison."

M. Verduret, with a shudder, turned to leave the prefecture, saying to Fanfrelot:

"Mine. Fauvel is saved!"

M. Verduret took the physician aside, and questioned him about the maniac.

"The wretched man is in hopeless state," replied the doctor; "this species of insanity is incurable. He thinks some one is trying to poison him, and nothing will persuade him to eat or drink anything; and, as it is impossible to force anything down his throat he will die of starvation, after having suffered all the tortures of poison."

M. Verduret, with a shudder, turned to leave the prefecture, saying to Fanfrelot:

"Mine. Fauvel is saved!"

M. Verduret took the physician aside, and questioned him about the maniac.

"The wretched man is in hopeless state," replied the doctor; "this species of insanity is incurable. He thinks some one is trying to poison him, and nothing will persuade him to eat or drink anything; and, as it is impossible to force anything down his throat he will die of starvation, after having suffered all the tortures of poison."

M. Verduret, with a shudder, turned to leave the prefecture, saying to Fanfrelot:

"Mine. Fauvel is saved!"

M. Verduret took the physician aside, and questioned him about the maniac.

"The wretched man is in hopeless state," replied the doctor; "this species of insanity is incurable. He thinks some one is trying to poison him, and nothing will persuade him to eat or drink anything; and, as it is impossible to force anything down his throat he will die of starvation, after having suffered all the tortures of poison."

M. Verduret, with a shudder, turned to leave the prefecture, saying to Fanfrelot:

"Mine. Fauvel is saved!"

M. Verduret took the physician aside, and questioned him about the maniac.

"The wretched man is in hopeless state," replied the doctor; "this species of insanity is incurable. He thinks some one is trying to poison him, and nothing will persuade him to eat or drink anything; and, as it is impossible to force anything down his throat he will die of starvation, after having suffered all the tortures of poison."

M. Verduret, with a shudder, turned to leave the prefecture, saying to Fanfrelot:

"Mine. Fauvel is saved!"

M. Verduret took the physician aside, and questioned him about the maniac.

"The wretched man is in hopeless state," replied the doctor; "this species of insanity is incurable. He thinks some one is trying to poison him, and nothing will persuade him to eat or drink anything; and, as it is impossible to force anything down his throat he will die of starvation, after having suffered all the tortures of poison."