

FILE NO. 103

-BY-

Emile Gaboriau.

He drew from his pocket a small key, which he laid on the table, and said: "Here is the key of your safe, monsieur. I hope for my sake that you will some day be convinced of my innocence; and I hope for your sake that the truth will not come too late. Before leaving, hand over the books, papers, and accounts necessary for my successor. I must at the same time inform you that, without speaking of the stolen sum, I leave a deficit in cash."

"A deficit?" thought the commissary; "how, after this, can his guilt be doubted? Before stealing the whole contents of the safe, he has practiced by occasional small thefts."

"A deficit," said the detective to himself, "now, no doubt, the very innocence of this poor devil gives an appearance of appearance of great depravity; was he guilty, he would have replaced the first money by a portion of the second."

The grave importance of Prosper's statement was considerably diminished by the explanation he proceeded to make: "There is a deficit of three thousand five hundred francs of my cash account, which has been disposed of in the following manner: two thousand taken by myself in advance of my salary; fifteen hundred advanced to several of my fellow-clerks. This is the last day of the month; to-morrow the salaries will be paid, consequently..."

"Where you authorized to draw whenever you wished to advance the clerk's pay?" "No; but I knew that M. Fauvel would not have refused me permission to oblige my friends in the bank. What I did is done everywhere; I have simply followed my predecessor's example."

The banker nodded. The police commissary shut up his portfolio, bowed to the banker, and said to Bertomy: "Come!" Prosper had put on his coat and hat coolly, and he left the room with the two representatives of the law, while the banker sorrowfully regarded the departure.

CHAPTER IV. NINA GIPSY.

It was Fanferlot's duty to take the prisoner to prison, but he asked his principal to let him proceed in another direction. He wanted to secure the note of Bertomy's which he knew to be in Cavallion's charge. The easiest way was to arrest him, but he might refuse to betray who the "Gipsy" was, and, on second thoughts, the detective concluded to dog the envoy until he could catch him in the act of delivering the note. This was but play to the detective.

Fanferlot waited a long time, but did not wait impatient; for he had often had to remain on watch entire nights at a time, with much less important objects in view than the present one. Besides, his mind was busily occupied in estimating the value of his discoveries, weighing his chances, and, like Alexander in the "Arabian Nights," building the foundation of his fortune upon present success.

Finally, about one o'clock, he saw Cavallion rise from his desk, change his coat, and take down his hat. "Very good!" he exclaimed, "my man is coming out; I must keep my eyes skinned."

In another moment the clerk came forth, and after a slight hesitation in choosing the shortest route, he darted off at such a smart pace that the Squirrel had time to do to keep up with him. On reaching the Rue Chaptal, Cavallion suddenly stopped, and entered the house numbered 33.

He had scarcely taken three steps up the narrow corridor when he felt a touch on his shoulder, and, turning abruptly, found himself face to face with Fanferlot. He recognized him at once, and turning very pale, he looked around for means of escape.

But the detective, anticipating the attempt, barred the passage-way. Cavallion saw that he was fairly caught. "What do you want with me?" he asked, in a voice tremulous with fright. Fanferlot was distinguished for his exquisite suavity and unequalled urbanity. Even with his prisoners he was the perfect man of courtesy, and never was known to handoff a man without first obsequiously apologizing for being compelled to do so.

rested. Take with you five hundred francs when you leave me the key of the safe. "Leave your address with Cavallion, who will explain what I have not had time to tell. Be hopeful, whatever happens. Good-by."

"Had Cavallion been less bewitched, he would have seen blank disappointment depicted on the detective's face after the perusal of the note. Fanferlot had cherished the hope that he was about to possess a very important document, which would clearly prove the guilt or innocence of Prosper; whereas he had only seized a love-letter written by a woman evidently more anxious about the welfare of the woman he loved than his own."

"Vainly did he puzzle over the letter, hoping to discover some hidden meaning; twist the words as he would, they proved nothing for or against the writer. The word 'everything' underlined could be interpreted in so many ways. The detective, however, determined not to drop the matter here."

"This Madame Nina Gipsy is doubtless a friend of M. Bertomy?" "She is his dearest friend." "Ah, I understand; and she lives here?" "You know it well enough, as you saw me go in."

"I suspected it to be the house, monsieur; now tell me whether the apartments she occupies are taken in her name." "No, Prosper." "Exactly; and which floor, if you please?" "On the first."

"During this colloquy, Fanferlot had folded up the note, and slipped it into his pocket. "A thousand thanks, monsieur, for the information; and, in return, I will relieve you of the trouble of executing your commission. With your permission, I will myself take this note to Madame Gipsy."

Cavallion began to renege; but Fanferlot cut him short by saying: "I will also venture to give you a piece of advice. Return quietly to your business, and have nothing more to do with this affair."

"But Prosper is a good friend of mine, and has saved me from ruin more than once." "Only the more reason for your keeping quiet. You cannot be of the slightest assistance to him, and I can tell you that you may be of great injury. As you are known by his devoted friend, of course your absence at this time will be remarked upon."

"But, monsieur, I am sure." "Prosper is innocent, I am sure." Fanferlot was of the same opinion, but he had no idea of betraying his private thoughts; and yet for the success of his investigations it was necessary to impress the importance of prudence and discretion upon the young man; he would have told him to keep silent concerning what had passed between them, but he dared not.

"What you say may be true," he said. "I hope it is, for the sake of M. Bertomy, and on your own account, too; for, if he is guilty, you will certainly be very much annoyed, and perhaps suspected of complicity, as you are well known to be intimate with him."

was about to fall, extended his arms to catch her. "Unless someone who is not listless conceals an indomitable energy. The distress quickly passed off. She tottered, but did not fall, and stood up looking stronger than ever; raising her delicate little hand over her eyes, and cried out: 'Explain yourself! what does all this mean? Do you know anything about the contents of this note?'"

Although Fanferlot betrayed courage in daily ascending with the most dangerous rascals, he was positively terrified by Madame Gipsy. "Alas!" he murmured. "Prosper is to be arrested, accused of being a thief!"

"Yes, madam, he is accused of taking thousands from the bank safe." "It is false, impossible, absurd!" she screamed. She had dropped Fanferlot's hand; and her fury, like that of a spoiled child, found vent in violent actions. She tore her web-like handkerchief, and the magnificent lace on her gown lay scattered on the floor.

"What a stupid idea! Why should he steal! Is he not rich?" "M. Bertomy is not rich, madam; he has nothing but his salary." This answer seemed to confound Madame Gipsy.

"But," she insisted, "I have always seen him have plenty of money; not rich—then—?" "She dared not finish; but her eyes met Fanferlot's, and they understood each other."

Madame Nina's look meant. "He committed the robbery in order to gratify my extravagant whims." "Very likely." "No," she cried, "I regret to say that Prosper would never have stolen from me. Can you understand a man robbing a bank to obtain means of bestowing pleasure and luxury upon the woman he loves; but Prosper does not love me, he never has loved me. I know what love is, and I am not an affectionate, true-hearted man; and my own sufferings of the last year make me know how miserable I must have made him by my cold return. Also, he must suffer curses before we can feel for him. No, I am not returning to Prosper; he would not care if I—"

"But, then, madam, why—?" "Ah, yes," interrupted Nina, "why you will be very wise if you can answer me. For a year have I vainly sought an answer to this question, so said to me. I, a woman, cannot answer it; and I defy you to do so. He is kind and indulgent; but he does not betray himself, never will he commit himself. Ignorant people call him weak, yielding; I tell you that fair-haired man is a fool of iron painted like a reed."

"What you say may be true," he said. "I hope it is, for the sake of M. Bertomy, and on your own account, too; for, if he is guilty, you will certainly be very much annoyed, and perhaps suspected of complicity, as you are well known to be intimate with him."

"Cavallion was overcome. "Now, you had best take my advice, monsieur, and return to your business, and Good-morning, monsieur." The poor fellow had no sooner turned the corner of the street, than Fanferlot entered. No, gipsy went upstairs, and knocked at the first door he came to.

It was opened by a tiger dressed in the most fanciful livery. "Is Madame Gipsy at home?" The groom hesitated; seeing this, Fanferlot showed his note, and said: "This is the note of M. Bertomy, which he has just handed to me, and wait for an answer."

"With these three lines, madam, you can make Madame Alexandre do anything you wish." "Very good. Now, how am I to let Cavallion know my address? It was he who should have brought me Prosper's letter."

"He was unable to come, madam," interrupted the detective; but I will give him your address. Madame Gipsy was about to send for a maid, but Fanferlot said he was in a hurry, and would send her one. He seemed to be a luck that day; for a hack was passing the door and he hailed it.

"Wait here," he said to the driver, telling him what he was, "for a little bric-a-brac who is coming down with some trunks. If she tells you to drive her to Quay Saint-Michel, cross my bill; if she gives you any other address, get down from your seat, and fix your harness. I will keep in sight."

He stepped across the street, and stood by the door of the wine store. He had not long to wait. In a few minutes the loud cracking of a whip apprised him that Madame Nina had started for the Archangel. "Ah!" he said, gaily, "I hold her, at any rate."

CHAPTER V. THE CASE PROGRESSSES. At the same hour that Madame Nina Gipsy was seeking refuge at the Archangel, Bertomy was being entered on the commitment book at the police office. Since the moment when he had resumed his habitual composure, he had not felt other.

Vainly did the people around him watch for a suspicious expression, or any sign giving way under the danger of his situation. Fanferlot's glance answered. "Very likely." "No," she cried, "I regret to say that Prosper would never have stolen from me. Can you understand a man robbing a bank to obtain means of bestowing pleasure and luxury upon the woman he loves; but Prosper does not love me, he never has loved me. I know what love is, and I am not an affectionate, true-hearted man; and my own sufferings of the last year make me know how miserable I must have made him by my cold return. Also, he must suffer curses before we can feel for him. No, I am not returning to Prosper; he would not care if I—"

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was vulgarly and pitifully denominated by a certain magistrate as the great public wash-house of all the dirty linen in Paris. It was full of people. The bench was almost entirely occupied. This stifling atmosphere, and the sight of so much misery, made the cashier ill and faint; he was feeling as if another five minutes' stay among these wretched creatures would make him deadly sick, when a little old usher dressed in black, wearing the signals of his office, a steel chain, cried out: "Prosper Bertomy!"

The unhappy man arose, and, without knowing how, found himself in the office of the judge. For a moment he was blinded. He had come out of a dark room; and this one had a window directly opposite the door, so that a flood of light fell suddenly upon him. This office, like all those on the gallery, was of a very ordinary appearance, small and dingy.

Opposite the door was a large desk, filled with bundles of law papers, behind which was seated the judge, facing those who entered, so that his face remained in the shade, while the faces of the prisoner or witness whom he questioned was in a glare of light. At the right, before a little table, sat a clerk writing, the indispensable auxiliary of the judge.

But Prosper observed none of these details; his whole attention was concentrated upon the arbiter of his fate, and as he closely examined his face he was convinced that the jailer was right in calling him an honorable man. M. Patrigent's plain face with its irregular outline, thick whiskers, lit up by a pair of bright, intelligent eyes, and a kindly expression, was calculated to impress one favorably at first sight.

"Take a seat," he said to Prosper. This little attention was gratefully welcomed by the prisoner, for he had expected to be treated with harsh contempt. He looked upon it as a good sign, and his mind felt slight relief. M. Patrigent turned toward the clerk, and said: "We will begin now, Signat; pay attention."

"What is your name?" he then asked, looking at Prosper. "Auguste Prosper Bertomy." "How old are you?" "I shall be thirty the 5th of next May." "What is your profession?" "I am—that is I was—a chief cashier in M. Fauvel's bank."

The judge stopped to consult the little memorandum lying on his desk. Prosper, who followed attentively every movement, began to be logical, saying to himself that never would so unprejudiced a man have the cruelty to send him to prison again. After finding what he looked for, M. Patrigent resumed the examination. "Where do you live?" he asked. "At No. 33 Rue Chaptal, for the last four years."

"Where were you born?" "At Beaucaire." "Are your parents living?" "My mother died two years ago; my father is still living." "Does he live in Paris?" "No, monsieur; he lives at Beaucaire with my sister, who married one of the engineers of the Southern Canal. He was formerly superintendent of bridges and canals; then he was employed on the Southern Canal, with my brother-in-law; now he has retired."

There was a moment's silence. The judge had turned his chair around, so that his head was apparently averted, he had a good view of the workings of Prosper's face. "Well," he said, abruptly, "you are accused of having robbed M. Fauvel of three hundred and fifty thousand francs."

During the last twenty-four hours the wretched young man had had time to familiarize with the terrible accusation; and yet, uttered as it was in this formal, legal tone, he seemed to be in a world of horror which rendered him incapable of opening his lips. "What have you to answer?" asked the judge.

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