

[Written for The Flag of our Union]

Mag Dufries;
— or, —
The Lost Child

by Fred. Hunter

IT WAS a wretchedly cold and dismal night in December, as an officer of the Parisian police was hurrying along homeward, after his day's duty. The clock above St. Martin struck nine, and the sleet was blowing rudely across the pavement, as the man was crossing a narrow street that led to the westward, when the figure of a poorly dressed woman, apparently, though tall and masculine for a female, suddenly stepped in his way, from around the bleak corner he was passing.

“Berton!” she shouted, “is it not Berton?”

“Yes, what now? Quick—for this is too bad a night to stand talking in the wind, here. Who are you? What is it?”

“Here—look here,” said the crone, stepping beneath the lamp.

“I can't read any papers tonight,” said Berton. “God bless us! how do you suppose a man can see anything in the midst of this snowstorm, by gaslight?”

But the woman clung to his coat-cape, and said, “See! you can read this—*this?*” and Berton saw by the light above them that the miserable old woman held in her withered fingers a placard, offering a reward of one hundred louis' for the arrest of one Silbet, a noted housebreaker who had served three terms at *La Force*, and who was supposed to be the scoundrel who had lately attacked the carriage of a noble marquis of the realm, and secured his repeater, a casket of jewels, and a large amount of ready money he had in his vehicle.

“Well, what of that? I have seen it a dozen times today. Go home,” said the officer, “and don't stand here, begging and freezing.”

“*Home!*” said the hag, “ha, ha! I don't beg, though, Berton, do you mind. I haven't come to that, yet. Wouldn't the nabbing of this Silbet please you? And wouldn't a hundred Napoleons be a good night's work for a deputy, eh?” continued the woman.

“Well, and what of it?” asked the officer.

“I know where he is,” said the old woman, in a low whisper; “that's all.”

“And have you got so bad as this, Mag? The associate of robbers and housebreakers?”

“Never mind—you don't want the reward, and the credit of taking Silbet—good night.” And the crone turned away. But Berton hailed her, as the thought struck him that good might come of this, though he knew the woman to be an erratic and questionable character.

“Come, then, Mag,” he said, “if you’re not lying to me, and really mean to help serve the demands of justice, tell me where Silbet is; and *you* shall have the reward, if he is secured and caged through the information you can give. But hasten, for it’s too cold to stand here, speculating.”

“This, way, then,” replied Mag; and she turned down the narrow, dark street beyond, from whence she had so suddenly emerged as the officer encountered her.

Mag led the way, and Berton followed closely on, securing his pistols as he went. They travelled half a mile, nearly, through lane after lane, until they came to a black and dingy court, at the extreme part of the faubourg of St. Germain. Into this suspicious passage Mag was just about turning, when the officer (who was not unacquainted with the region he was in, generally) halted, and said to his doubtful conductor:

“No, Mag, not there! Not in that den, alone with you, only. I won’t risk it.”

“I thought you were a brave man, Berton!” exclaimed the crone. “You have the credit of it. Are you afraid?”

“Not there, I say, Mag.”

“Then you won’t find your bird, that’s all.”

“So be it, then. I will come here tomorrow, with aid, and you shall have the reward, if you place no impediment in the—”

At this moment a stealthy footstep was heard in the dark, low passage where they were standing, and Berton instantly grasped and cocked his pistol—but it was too late! A harsh blow upon his head instantly followed, and the officer fell heavily to the pavement, as two stout men seized him, and a third caught the arms of Mag Dufries, his conductor, making them both prisoners, without the uttering of a single syllable aloud.

The officer and his would-be informant were very unceremoniously dragged back into an old building, entirely in the rear of the court, and while Mag was taken into the room upon the ground floor, the insensible body of Berton was carried up a rickety flight of stairs, and thrown rudely in upon the floor of the apartment.

“Did it settle him?” asked one of the two parties who had assailed him.

“No, no,” replied the other. “No harm’s done; but he’s a little *sleepy* just now,” he continued, alluding to his victim’s continued unconsciousness. “It’s a little cold here, and he’s been hard at work today, very likely. Now—the gag”; and forcing this firmly into Berton’s mouth, they pinioned his arms and legs, and sat him up in the corner of the room, as he was coming slowly to consciousness.

For a moment or two after the thus crippled deputy of the *Procureur du Roi* had first opened his eyes, a sense of acute pains in the back of his head and shoulders brought to his imperfect recollection the scene in which he had voluntarily been engaged at the moment of the attack. He remembered the hag who had led him into this mischief, and he now saw how foolishly he had confided in her for the moment, for he wrongfully believed that it was through Mag's instrumentality that he now found himself,—he knew not exactly where,—but bound hand and foot, gagged, and utterly helpless. His weapons had been taken from him, a small low lamp was burning in the room where he lay, and he was entirely alone for a time.

Though he could make nothing of the confusion, yet he soon heard loud talking and swearing in the apartment beneath him. It was caused by the three ruffians who had Mag Dufries in charge, and who had suspected her of peaching.

“How came Berton here, then, you miserable hound?” queried the foremost of the rough trio. “If you hadn't led the way, how would he have known that anyone was here? Tell us that.”

Mag protested her innocence, stoutly. She declared that she was going to her lodging-house, and met Berton, nearby. He spoke with her, bade her go home, and wandered along by her until they reached the passage where they were found. She was just framing some excuse or plan to get rid of him, when they came up and attacked him; and if they had secured him safely, for the time being, she was glad of it. The villains rather liked Mag's tone, and thought she was all right once more, after a little parleying. They left her below stairs, and went up to see how their prisoner was getting along. When they entered the room where Berton lay, they observed at once that he had recovered his senses again.

The foremost of this brace of scoundrels was Robert Silbet, himself. Berton knew him instantly, but he could not speak, on account of the gag that filled his mouth. Silbet advanced towards the prostrate officer, and hailed him, insolently.

“*Eh bien, Monsieur Berton!*” he said. “Do you remember me? I think you do, monsieur. When we last met, you helped to place the ruffles on these wrists. If I remember rightly, I promised you then that we should one day be even. Why don't you speak?” continued the ruffian, knowing as he did that Berton was foully gagged, and was totally helpless. “Come, man, you are not won't to be thus bashful,” he added, kicking the prostrate officer with the heavy riding boot he wore. “You will have small leisure now for reflection. Your game is up. Make your peace with those you will, for when you go out of this place, you'll be carried out.”

Then, drawing forth a superb gold repeater from his vest, which Berton at a glance believed to be the property of the recently robbed marquis, Silbet continued:

“It is now eleven o'clock, monsieur. We have resolved that you shall never see another sunrise. You are by far too troublesome to our profession, and are much too well acquainted with the details of our business. We will settle with you, permanently, anon.” And with this threat, the scoundrels once more left Berton to himself.

Upon reaching the room below, Silbet hailed the old crone who had led Berton into this peril, to whom he said, "Go up there, and see to him. No—bring us some wine first. Now go up and see that he doesn't talk too loud. We'll look to his case, by-and-by. And mind yon, Mag Dufries, no deceit, no treachery, or you know the consequences." And he cocked a heavy pistol, as he thus concluded. Laying the formidable weapon on the table before her, he said again, "Go, and see to him."

As soon as Mag had reached the room where Berton was confined, she raised her long finger, and closing the door said to the sufferer:

"—'sh, Berton! I'm sorry for the blows you got. I supposed he was alone. His accomplices are here, and two of them are full of wine, already. They'll soon be in their cups. You won't be harmed, I think. They want to escape, that's all. You'll be left here, and all will come out right. Does it hurt you?" she asked, observing Berton's motions to her to relieve his mouth of the gag.

"I can't take it out. I dare not, yet. They'd murder me, if I did."

"More wine here, Mag!" shouted Silbet, at the entry-door of his room. "More wine, you hound!" and Mag descended to obey his order, bringing up half a dozen bottles of stout old Madeira.

"How's your friend Berton?" queried the robber, as she entered with the liquor.

"Nearer dead than alive," she replied. "He'll trouble us no further, I venture."

"We don't mean he shall. But look to him, and see that he doesn't get his fetters off. These fellows have a happy way of helping themselves out of trouble, commonly, and will bear looking after. Go—watch him"; and as Mag left the room, the half-drunken trio turned again to their cups.

When Mag came back again, she instantly, but noiselessly, secured the door upon the inside, and advancing to Berton, quickly wrenched the gag from his jaws—a performance that greatly relieved him.

"Now," she said, "you may escape, if you dare to venture it. Alone, here, you see you can do nothing, and I wouldn't answer for Silbet, when he gets another bottle or two in his skin"; and while she spoke, she unfastened the strong cords that bound the officer's hands and arms and feet, releasing him, at last, entirely from confinement in his limbs.

"I do this to convince you that I am now acting with you in good faith. I shall get away from them the best way I can. They'll swear and rave, but they won't harm me, I think. So hasten! Raise this window carefully, secure these cords together strongly. Fifteen feet below there is an old shed, directly beneath the casement. Let yourself down by the cords here, and fly, or procure aid and take them, while they are too soggy to defend themselves. They won't hurt Mag Humphries."

“Mag *Humphries!*” exclaimed the officer, as he busied himself with knotting the cords hastily together, “Who is Mag Humphries?”

“Never mind,—I mean Mag *Dufries,*” added the old woman, as if she had momentarily forgotten herself.

“Is this an *alias* of yours, then?” said Berton, at once suspecting her.

“*N’importe,* Berton. Hasten you! Hear them yell below. The wine is working,—look to yourself, and don’t mind me.”

“But if you are Margaret Humphries, I want to know it. Did you ever have a daughter—a child, by this name, Mag?”

“Quick—quick—Berton! They’re coming.”

“I go—I go. But say, had you such a daughter?”

“Yes—but she’s dead, long years ago. Never mind me—hasten, or you’ll be caught again.”

“If you get out of this den alive, Mag,” said Berton,—“and I will instantly return here with succor, if I get off—let me see you, immediately. Your child is *not* dead! I know her. Come to me—find me—and I will show her to you!” and with these words, as the three intoxicated robbers mounted the old staircase, Berton darted over the windowsill, and having previously secured the ropes to the casing, he touched the roof of the shed in safety, while Mag fell heavily back upon the floor, senseless from the shock occasioned by this suddenly acquired information regarding her supposed dead child.

Silbet advanced to the door of the room where he supposed the officer to be safely secured, and finding the door locked upon the inside, he commenced thundering away at the panels, in right good earnest.

“Open the door!” he shouted. “Open, Mag Dufries, or I’ll cure you of your tricks. What are you doing, you she wolf!” he cried, suddenly suspecting something had gone wrong.

“How the wind howls,” said one of the men.

“Where does it come from?” asked another.

“The window, inside here,” suggested the third.

“They have escaped!” muttered the first speaker.

“Not quite. I’ll be bound. He was too strongly tied for that,” said Silbet.

“Both of ’em,” added his companion.

“Down with the door—down with it!” shouted the chief robber, who could get no answer, and who now feared that it was too true. And three minutes afterwards, the old door was battered off its hinges.

The three ruffians sprang into the room, but all was darkness, and the wind and sleet were driving furiously in at the open window.

“A light, Louis,” yelled Silbet; “bring a light! They’re gone!” and as he stepped forward, he stumbled headlong against the hard wall, over the prostrate body of Mag Dufries, who had fallen in a fit a few minutes previously, and who had not yet recovered from the shock.

Silbet rose again, stepped to the corner of the room where he had left the police officer, whom he so greatly feared when that man was at liberty, and saw that he had got away!

“He’s gone—gone!” muttered the robber, as the lantern was brought. “Close the window, Louis. Yes, he’s gone, and has murdered or strangled old Mag, here; take her up—take her up!”

Such was the impression of the whole trio, who now believed that the artful official had by some means contrived to extricate himself from the cords with which he had been bound, and had fastened the door, choked the old woman, and by means of the ropes had lowered himself from the chamber and fled.

In a moment longer, Silbet, who was not so deeply in his cups as the rest, began to think of the results of this night’s work, and he naturally supposed that the police officer, who had been so roughly handled there, and who had made good his escape, would not be absent long, the more especially as a hundred louis’ reward had been offered for his arrest. He said to himself, “we must leave this place, instanter, or we are caged for the present”; and he went about the execution of a precipitate retreat from the old house, forthwith.

This determination on the part of Silbet was a very laudable one, and if he had been immediately seconded in his views by his confederates, it would have been very well for him and them. But they had imbibed too much to be controlled easily; and, while they were looking after the old woman’s case, who had come to consciousness again, the dilapidated and ancient resort of these thieves and villains was surrounded by a corps of *gens d’armes*, whom Berton had gathered at the two nearest stationhouses, after his escape, and the retreat of Silbet and his two companions was effectually cut off.

Berton knew very well that the customers he had now to deal with would submit to no child’s play, and he resolved to enter into no parley with them. Without hesitation, therefore, he instantly directed the front door to be battered down, and the first intimation that the robbers had of the presence of the military and police force, was the thundering of the men below stairs.

“There they are!” shouted Silbet. “Now look to yourselves, boys. It’s just as I supposed it would be. We’re trapped, certain, and must fight our way out. Come on!”

They descended the stairs halfway, and a score of bristling bayonets greeted them there. They hurried back, and darted to the rear window, through which Berton had retreated, but as many more gens d'armes were ready to receive them, on the roof and around the shed below. They were pressed upon by the advancing guard, and nothing but a desperate *coup de main* could save them. They rushed forward, and in another moment, all three of the wretches were disabled and effectually secured by the overpowering numbers of the station-guard. Berton once more placed the iron "ruffles" upon Silbet's sturdy wrists, and the guilty trio were borne away in safety to the nearest prison.

Berton had caught the noted housebreaker and thief, and he had well earned his reward and the credit that attached to his enterprise; but he did not forget the poor woman who had aided him in the undertaking. He directed that she should be provided for during the night, and next day he communicated with her once more, in regard to her child.

As soon as she informed him that her real name was Margaret Humphries, he despatched an agent with directions to one Mathes—a linendraper in Paris—in whose service there was an orphan girl, whose name was the same, and whose story he happened to know. This girl was now seventeen years old. She had been enticed away from her mother when she was only eight years of age, and had been out at service most of the time since. Her history was commonly known in the faubourg where she dwelt, and she supposed that her parents were both dead. She remembered when and how she had been taken from her mother's house, in a distant part of the city, but as she found herself afterwards more comfortably situated where she sojourned than she had ever been at home, she continued to remain in service, and never would have known of her parent's wretchedness, but for the incident that occurred, in which she had been involved, and which we have already described.

After the loss of her child, Margaret—or *Mag*, as she was called—became sick, and, for three or four years, had been a burthen to herself and her neighbors. She got pretty low at last, changed her name to Dufries, and became the companion of thieves and robbers, to keep her from starvation. She met with Berton, as we have seen,—he hinted what he did to her, when she carelessly pronounced her own proper name, and now he resolved to pay over into her hands the hundred louis d'ors that came into his possession as the reward for Silbet's arrest, and to reunite the mother and child, in the hope that they would thus be enabled to retire to some town in the interior, and with this handsome amount of money begin life anew and respectably again.

In this effort he was entirely successful. The girl was brought, and her mother instantly recognized her stolen daughter. In the meantime, Berton had caused the old woman to be placed in good hands, and she was decently dressed when her more ambitious child first met her. The plan that the officer had arranged was fully carried out, and when young Margaret was informed that so handsome a sum would be placed at her mother's disposal, and had the opportunity to listen to the advice that Berton gave with the money, she was greatly pleased, and agreed forthwith to accompany her newly found parent out of the town. They afterwards settled down at Vigny, a few miles distant from Paris, and became respectable and respected in the neighborhood, where, with their little store of gold, they set up a small shop, and thenceforward continued to earn a livelihood.

Silbet was tried, convicted, and sentenced to the galleys for life, very soon after his arrest. One of his accomplices turned evidence for the king, and most of the property lost by the marquis was recovered, subsequently, through this instrumentality. The other knave was hurt in the conflict that attended the arrest, and died of a bayonet wound, received in his attempt to force his way out of the house by the guard.

Berton added new laurels to his fame as a police agent, and soon after this adventure was promoted for his bravery and success in taking the cunning and desperate rogue who had so long been a scourge to the city and neighborhood. He was somewhat bruised and lamed after his fearful night's work, but this kind of thing was a part of his profession, and he expected rough treatment at times.

But he found a far greater satisfaction in reflecting that he had saved poor Margaret Humphries (alias *Dufries*) from destruction, and at the same time had rendered her and her lost child happy and comfortable in life afterwards. Old "Mag" lived to bless the cold night upon which she so mysteriously met with Berton, and her daughter finally married a thrifty mechanic of Vigny, and they lived happily amid their continuous good fortune for many long years thereafter.

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