

True To His Oath

One morning about ten years ago the Parisian public were made aware of the fact that the confidential clerk of Monsieur Laurin, a well-known banker, had absconded with the sum of nearly 1,000,000 francs. Large payments were due that day by the banker, to meet which he had been relying upon this sum. A run upon the bank followed, and that evening his name was among the list of bankrupts. Detectives had, of course, instantly been put upon the track of the absconding clerk, and, just as he was stepping on the boat at Calais to cross the channel, he was arrested and conveyed back to Paris.

When arrested, he seemed horrified at the charge against him and earnestly protested his innocence. This was but natural under the circumstances, and did not have the least impression upon the officers; but one thing that did puzzle them was the fact that no trace of the money he had stolen could be found. At his trial the evidence against him was too strong to admit of any doubt of his guilt. The banker swore that on the previous day he had given the clerk several orders upon the treasury, amounting in all to between 900,000 and 1,000,000 francs, with instructions, after getting them cashed, to return to the bank, and deposit the money in the vault, of which he alone, beside the banker himself, knew the combination.

Evidence was forthcoming from the Treasury Department that he had received the money, but the evidence of the other [employees] was definite that he had not returned to the bank during business hours, while the janitor was confident he had not done so afterward. This, taken altogether, and added to the fact of his sudden flight, seemed conclusive to the Judges that he was guilty. The prisoner's defense took the form of an accusation against his employer. He acknowledged having received the orders, and also getting them cashed, but denied that he had been told to deposit the amount in the bank vault. Instead he averred the banker had told him to retain the money in his possession until evening, when he was to admit himself by a key the banker gave him to his house, and deliver the money into his own hands. This the prisoner declared he had done, when the banker, unlocking a drawer in the desk at which he sat, took out a large envelope, and told the clerk to address it to a well-known banking firm in Leadenhall street, London.

Having done as he was desired, his employer took a folded piece of paper from the drawer, and placed it in the envelope, sealed it securely, and gave it into his hands, telling him that he wished him to start for London at once to deliver it to the firm to which it was addressed, and receive in return some securities of value lying in their hands. As he had on more than one former occasion been thus sent on similar secret missions by his employer, he thought there was nothing strange in the request, and, setting out in less than an hour, had traveled all night to Calais, arriving there just in time to catch the boat, was stepping on board, when he was arrested and brought back to Paris to be charged with a crime of which he had never even dreamed.

The officers testified to having found the envelope upon him, directed as he had stated; but, on opening it, the inclosure was found to be nothing more than several sheets of blank paper. His story though told with the earnestness of truth and conscious innocence, seemed so wildly far-fetched and improbable that it only influenced the Judges still more strongly in the belief of his

guilt. To be sure, the main proof against him was the banker's word, but the whole chain of circumstances also favored his assertions. Where or how the clerk had hidden the money was certainly an unexplained mystery, but the supposition was natural that he had laid his plans well beforehand, and made arrangements so that it would still be secure in case he was arrested before he could make good his escape. Weighing the evidence carefully, though not perhaps without taking into account the high social standing the banker had always occupied, the Judges pronounced the clerk as guilty, and sentenced him to the galleys for a term of twenty years.

When the prisoner heard this doom, to which even death would have been preferable, his head fell upon his breast, and an unrestrainable wail of agony broke from his lips. The following day he was sent to the galleys at Toulouse. Four years passed away, during which time the banker had resumed his business, and had reached an even higher social position than he had occupied before. His only child, a daughter of more than ordinary beauty and sweetness of disposition, had blossomed into womanhood. The wealthy young Marquis de Beaunois was smitten by her charms and ambitious hopes were entering the banker's mind that through her he might even enter a higher grade of society and become associated with the nobility. He could now afford to laugh at the threat of vengeance uttered four years ago by a convict whose riveted chains were clanking in the galleys at Toulouse. He did not even know if he were alive or dead.

Had [anyone] told him, or had he happened to read, that one of those galley slaves, who was not even allowed a name, but was known as No. 411, had escaped, it would have passed out of his mind at once. Convicts often escape – it was nothing to him.

Time still passed on, and the date of the wedding of the banker's daughter with the young nobleman was fixed to take place with an elegance that was to surpass all former bridals of the season. All Paris knew of it, and one may judge of the sensation when, on the night before the wedding, the banker's house was broken into, and not only all the valuables taken, but the bride herself was carried away. A large reward was offered, but in vain; and the most earnest efforts of the whole detective force were fruitless to discover the slightest [clue] as to the perpetrators of this bold outrage. The days went by and grew into weeks, and still no tidings of the missing girl could be found, and the banker's form grew bent, and his face hollow and care-worn with anxiety and grief. The whole affection of his life had been wrapped up in this girl.

Late one night, after more than two weeks had passed, as he was seated in his library, in conversation with one of the detectives engaged on the fruitless search, a note was brought to him.

“I must see you at once,” was written in a large, sprawling hand. “I can give you tidings of your daughter.”

Almost overcome with emotion, the banker gave orders for the bearer to be admitted, while the detective rose quietly and took his position behind the curtain of the window. Scarcely had he done so, when the servant opened the door and admitted a man who, though flashily dressed, carried in his face and manner the unmistakable stamp of the lowest criminal class. The banker sprung from his chair, his face flushed with glad expectation, to meet him.

“You bring me news of my daughter?” he cried, eagerly.

“Yes,” the man answered; “that’s what I came for.”

“And where is she? Is she well? Tell me, quickly, and relieve my suspense.”

“I was here before, the night he did this little job,” the man went on, in a stolid sort of way, as if he were repeating a set speech and ignoring the other’s excited questions. “There were six of us to it beside the Captain. We six had all the swag. All the Captain wanted for his share was the girl; and, while we were gathering up the articles, he took her in his arms and walked off.”

“And where is she now? I will give any amount—my whole fortune—to have her restored to me!”

“None of us knew where he took her until [tonight]. He sent for me to come and fetch you to him.”

“Let us not lose a moment, then,” the banker exclaimed, eagerly. “I am ready this instant.”

The detective came from his hiding place behind the curtain.

“I will accompany you,” he said.

“Ah!” said the man, coolly surveying him, “you’re a detective. But it don’t matter. The Captain said he wasn’t particular if the whole force came.”

“Lead the way, then. We are ready,” the officer answered.

The man led the way out of the house and along the streets for a distance of nearly half a mile, until at length they reached one of the lowest quarters of the town, down by the river. Knocking at the door of an old, half-ruinous house, whose rear windows overlooked the stream, the guide gave some password to an old woman who answered the door, and then led the way up several flights of stairs, that creaked and groaned at every step, as if they would fall beneath their feet. Arrived at the top floor, the man knocked three times on a door at the head of the stairway. A voice answered, bidding them enter, and, doing so, they found themselves in a small, low-ceilinged room, one corner of which was partitioned off by a dingy curtain, and before the fireless grate a man was standing with folded arms. As they entered, a look of almost fiendish triumph lighted up his face, and he advanced to the banker.

“Monsieur Laurin,” he said, in cold, measured tones, “do you recognize me?”

The banker stared back, with an expression of dismay.

“Paul Favarge!” he gasped.

“Yes,” the other answered, “Paul Favarge—the clerk, who, to farther your own grasping aims, you consigned to a fate worse than death, and who swore to be revenged. The time has come. I will restore your daughter to you, but it is upon one condition, and one alone. If you refuse, you and she both die!”

“He waved his hand as he spoke, and, before they were aware of it, a man stood, one on each side of the banker and the detective, with a pistol leveled at their heads.

“You see, you are in my power,” said the other. “The condition that I require of you is that you confess you fabricated the story that sent me to the galleys, that you might secure the money yourself.”

An agony of irresolution was visible on the banker’s face, but he was silent.

“If you do not decide before I have counted three you die.”

Still the banker was silent.

“One—two—”

“Yes,” the banker almost shrieked, “I confess it all. You were innocent, and I the guilty one. Are you not satisfied now with your revenge? If you have any human pity left, let me see my daughter.”

“I have none,” the other answered, “but you shall have your wish.”

He drew aside the dingy curtain as he spoke, and the banker saw a pallid form lying upon a narrow pallet, but so wasted and attenuated that in features he could hardly recognize those of his daughter.

“My God!” he wailed, “she is dead.”

“Yes, she is dead,” the other answered, in the same fiendishly dispassionate tone. “Would you know how she met her death? Upon your soul is the sin, for it was you who made me the fiend I am. She starved to death.”

The unhappy father sank upon the floor as if struck by a bullet. “Let your revenge be complete, and kill me also,” he wailed.

“No,” the other answered with a fiendish laugh; “it is I who die. My vengeance would not be complete if you did not live. Officer,” he added, turning to the detective, “this man is by his own confession your prisoner; arrest him. My band know of my resolve, and I have arranged it all. My mission on earth is accomplished now, and life is unendurable to me.”

As he spoke he placed the muzzle of a pistol to his forehead, and, pressing the trigger, fell to the floor a corpse.

The detective turned to arrest the banker, but started back with an exclamation of horrified surprise. The muscles of the banker's face were twitching in a convulsive sort of way, until suddenly he burst into a peal of terrible, joyless laughter. He had become a raving maniac, and the convict's terrible vengeance was, indeed, complete.

The Waukeshaw Freeman [WI], July 8, 1880