

Caught In The Net

by

Emile Gaboriau

Web-Books.Com

Caught In The Net

1.	Putting On The Screw.....	3
2.	A Registry Office	16
3.	The Opinion Of Dr. Hortebise.....	24
4.	A Trustworthy Servant	31
5.	A Forgotten Crime.....	36
6.	A Medical Adviser	45
7.	In The Studio	55
8.	Mademoiselle De Mussidan	60
9.	Rose's Promotion	65
10.	You Are A Thief	69
11.	The Man-Milliner	79
12.	A Startling Revelation	89
13.	Husband And Wife.....	97
14.	Father And Daughter	102
15.	Master Chupin.....	108
16.	A Turn Of The Screw	113
17.	Some Scraps Of Paper.....	120
18.	An Infamous Trade	126
19.	A Friendly Rival	135
20.	A Council Of War.....	142
21.	An Academy Of Music.....	150
22.	Diamond Cut Diamond	155
23.	Father And Son.....	163
24.	An Artful Trick.....	169
25.	A New Skin	178
26.	At The Grand Turk	190
27.	The Last Link.....	198

1. Putting On The Screw

The cold on the 8th of February, 186-, was more intense than the Parisians had experienced during the whole of the severe winter which had preceded it, for at twelve o'clock on that day Chevalier's thermometer, so well known by the denizens of Paris, registered three degrees below zero. The sky was overcast and full of threatening signs of snow, while the moisture on the pavement and roads had frozen hard, rendering traffic of all kinds exceedingly hazardous. The whole great city wore an air of dreariness and desolation, for even when a thin crust of ice covers the waters of the Seine, the mind involuntarily turns to those who have neither food, shelter, nor fuel.

This bitterly cold day actually made the landlady of the Hotel de Perou, though she was a hard, grasping woman of Auvergne, gave a thought to the condition of her lodgers, and one quite different from her usual idea of obtaining the maximum of rent for the minimum of accommodation.

"The cold," remarked she to her husband, who was busily engaged in replenishing the stove with fuel, "is enough to frighten the wits out of a Polar bear. In this kind of weather I always feel very anxious, for it was during a winter like this that one of our lodgers hung himself, a trick which cost us fifty francs, in good, honest money, besides giving us a bad name in the neighborhood. The fact is, one never knows what lodgers are capable of doing. You should go up to the top floor, and see how they are getting on there."

"Pooh, pooh!" replied her husband, M. Loupins; "they will do well enough."

"Is that really your opinion?"

"I know that I am right. Daddy Tontaine went out as soon as it was light, and a short time afterward Paul Violaine came down. There is no one upstairs now but little Rose, and I expect that she has been wise enough to stick to her bed."

"Ah!" answered the landlady rather spitefully. "I have made up my mind regarding that young lady some time ago; she is a sight too pretty for this house, and so I tell you."

The Hotel de Perou stands in the Rue de la Hachette, not twenty steps from the Place de Petit Pont; and no more cruelly sarcastic title could ever have been conferred on a building. The extreme shabbiness of the exterior of the house, the narrow, muddy street in which it stood, the dingy windows covered with mud, and repaired with every variety of patch,--all seemed to cry out to the passers by: "This is the chosen abode of misery and destitution."

The observer might have fancied it a robbers' den, but he would have been wrong; for the inhabitants were fairly honest. The Hotel de Perou was one of those refuges, growing scarcer and more scarce every day, where unhappy men and women, who had been worsted in the battle of life, could find a shelter in return for the change remaining from the last five-franc piece. They treat it as the shipwrecked mariner uses the rock upon which he climbs from the whirl of the angry waters, and breathes a deep sigh of relief as he collects his forces for a fresh effort. However wretched existence may be, a protracted sojourn in such a

shelter as the Hotel de Perou would be out of the question. The chambers in every floor of the house are divided into small slips by partitions, covered with canvas and paper, and pleasantly termed rooms by M. Loupins. The partitions were in a terrible condition, rickety and unstable, and the paper with which they were covered torn and hanging down in tatters; but the state of the attics was even more deplorable, the ceilings of which were so low that the occupants had to stoop continually, while the dormer windows admitted but a small amount of light. A bedstead, with a straw mattress, a rickety table, and two broken chairs, formed the sole furniture of these rooms. Miserable as these dormitories were, the landlady asked and obtained twenty-two francs for them by the month, as there was a fireplace in each, which she always pointed out to intending tenants. The young woman whom M. Loupins alluded to by the name of Rose was seated in one of these dreary dens on this bitter winter's day. Rose was an exquisitely beautiful girl about eighteen years of age. She was very fair; her long lashes partially concealed a pair of steely blue eyes, and to a certain extent relieved their hard expression. Her ripe, red lips, which seemed formed for love and kisses, permitted a glimpse of a row of pearly teeth. Her bright waving hair grew low down upon her forehead, and such of it as had escaped from the bondage of a cheap comb, with which it was fastened, hung in wild luxuriance over her exquisitely shaped neck and shoulders. She had thrown over her ragged print gown the patched coverlet of the bed, and, crouched upon the tattered hearthrug before the hearth, upon which a few sticks smouldered, giving out hardly a particle of heat, she was telling her fortune with a dirty pack of cards, endeavoring to console herself for the privations of the day by the promise of future prosperity. She had spread those arbiters of her destiny in a half circle before her, and divided them into threes, each of which had a peculiar meaning, and her breast rose and fell as she turned them up and read upon their faces good fortune or ill-luck. Absorbed in this task, she paid but little attention to the icy chilliness of the atmosphere, which made her fingers stiff, and dyed her white hands purple.

"One, two, three," she murmured in a low voice. "A fair man, that's sure to be Paul. One, two, three, money to the house. One, two, three, troubles and vexations. One, two, three, the nine of spades; ah, dear! more hardships and misery,--always that wretched card turning up with its sad story!"

Rose seemed utterly downcast at the sight of the little piece of painted cardboard, as though she had received certain intelligence of a coming misfortune. She soon, however, recovered herself, and was again shuffling the pack,--cut it, taking care to do so with her left hand, spread them out before her, and again commenced counting: one, two, three. This time the cards appeared to be more propitious, and held out promises of success for the future.

"I am loved," read she, as she gazed anxiously upon them,--"very much loved! Here is rejoicing, and a letter from a dark man! See, here he is,--the knave of clubs. Always the same," she continued; "I cannot strive against fate."

Then, rising to her feet, she drew from a crack in the wall, which formed a safe hiding-place for her secrets, a soiled and crumpled letter, and, unfolding it, she read for perhaps the hundredth time these words:--

"MADEMOISELLE,--

"To see you is to love you. I give you my word of honor that this is true. The wretched hovel where your charms are hidden is no fit abode for you. A home, worthy in every way to receive you, is at your service--Rue de Douai. It has been taken in your name, as I am straightforward in these matters. Think of my proposal, and make what inquiries you like concerning me. I have not yet attained my majority, but shall do so in five months and three days, when I shall inherit my mother's fortune. My father is wealthy, but old and infirm. From four to six in the afternoon of the next few days I will be in a carriage at the corner of the Place de Petit Pont.

"GASTON DE GANDELU."

The cynical insolence of the letter, together with its entire want of form, was a perfect example of the style affected by those loiterers about town, known to the Parisians as "mashers;" and yet Rose did not appear at all disgusted by the reception of such an unworthily worded proposal, but, on the contrary, rather pleased by its contents. "If I only dared," mused she, with a sigh,--"ah, if I only dared!" For a time she sat deeply immersed in thought, with her face buried in her hands, until she was aroused from her meditations by the sound of an active and youthful step upon the creaking stairs. "He has come back," she gasped; and with the agile movement of a cat she again concealed the letter in its hiding-place, and she had scarcely done so, when Paul Violaine entered the miserable room. He was a young man of twenty- three, of slender figure, but admirably proportioned. His face was a perfect oval, and his complexion of just that slight olive tint which betrays the native of the south of France. A slight, silky moustache concealed his upper lip, and gave his features that air of manliness in which they would have otherwise been deficient. His curly chestnut hair fell gracefully over a brow upon which an expression of pride was visible, and enhanced the peculiar, restless glance of his large dark eyes. His physical beauty, which was fully equal to that of Rose, was increased by an aristocratic air, popularly believed to be only found in the scions of noble families. The landlady, in her moments of good humor, used to assert her belief that her lodger was a disguised prince; but if this were the case, he was certainly one that had been overtaken by poverty. His dress, to which the closest attention had been paid, revealed the state of destitution in which he was,--not the destitution which openly asks for alms, but the hidden poverty which shuns communication and blushes at a single glance of pity. In this almost Arctic winter he wore clothes rendered thin by the constant friction of the clothes brush, over which was a light overcoat about as thick as the web of a spider. His shoes were well blacked, but their condition told the piteous tale of long walks in search of employment, or of that good luck which seems to evade its pursuer.

Paul was holding a roll of manuscript in his hand, and as he entered the room he threw it on the bed with a despairing gesture. "A failure again!" exclaimed he, in accents of the utmost depression. "Nothing else but failures!"

The young woman rose hastily to her feet; she appeared to have forgotten the cards completely; the smile of satisfaction faded from her face and her features, and an expression of utter weariness took its place.

"What! no success?" she cried, affecting a surprise which was evidently assumed. "No success, after all your promises when you left me this morning?"

"This morning, Rose, a ray of hope had penetrated my heart; but I have been deceived, or rather I deceived myself, and I took my ardent desires for so many promises which were certain to be fulfilled. The people that I have been to have not even the kindness to say 'No' plain and flat; they listen to all you have to say, and as soon as your back is turned they forget your existence. The coin that passes around in this infernal town is indeed nothing but idle words, and that is all that poverty-stricken talent can expect."

A silence of some duration ensued, and Paul was too much absorbed in his own thoughts to notice the look of contempt with which Rose was regarding him. His helpless resignation to adverse circumstances appeared to have turned her to stone.

"A nice position we are in!" said she at last. "What do you think will become of us?"

"Alas! I do not know."

"Nor I. Yesterday Madame Loupins came to me and asked for the eleven francs we owe here; and told me plainly that if within three days we did not settle our account, she would turn us out; and I know enough of her to be sure that she will keep her word. The detestable old hag would do anything for the pleasure of seeing me on the streets."

"Alone and friendless in the world," muttered Paul, paying but little attention to the young girl's words, "without a creature or a relative to care for you, or to lend you a helping hand."

"We have not a copper in the world," continued Rose with cruel persistency; "I have sold everything that I had, to preserve the rags that I am wearing. Not a scrap of wood remains, and we have not tasted food since yesterday morning."

To these words, which were uttered in a tone of the most bitter reproach, the young man made no reply, but clasped his icily cold hands against his forehead, as though in utter despair.

"Yes, that is a true picture of our position," resumed Rose coldly, her accents growing more and more contemptuous. "And I tell you that something must be done at once, some means discovered, I care not what, to relieve us from our present miserable state."

Paul tore off his overcoat, and held it toward her.

"Take it, and pawn it," exclaimed he; but the girl made no move.

"Is that all that you have to propose?" asked she, in the same glacial tone.

"They will lend you three francs upon it, and with that we can get bread and fuel."

"And after that is gone?"

"After that--oh, we will think of our next step, and shall have time to hit upon some plan. Time, a little time, is all that I require, Rose, to break asunder the bonds which seem to fetter me. Some day success must crown my efforts; and with success, Rose, dear, will come affluence, but in the meantime we must learn to wait."

"And where are the means to enable us to wait?"

"No matter; they will come. Only do what I tell you, and who can say what to-morrow----"

Paul was still too much absorbed in his own thoughts to notice the expression upon the young girl's face; for had he done so, he would at once have perceived that she was not in the humor to permit the matter to be shelved in this manner.

"To-morrow!" she broke in sarcastically. "To-morrow,--always the same pitiful cry. For months past we seem to have lived upon the word. Look you here, Paul, you are no longer a child, and ought to be able to look things straight in the face. What can I get on that threadbare coat of yours? Perhaps three francs at the outside. How many days will that last us? We will say three. And then, what then? Besides, can you not understand that your dress is too shabby for you to make an impression on the people you go to see? Well-dressed applicants only have attention, and to obtain money, you must appear not to need it; and, pray, what will people think of you if you have no overcoat? Without one you will look ridiculous, and can hardly venture into the streets."

"Hush!" cried Paul, "for pity's sake, hush! for your words only prove to me more plainly that you are like the rest of the world, and that want of success is a pernicious crime in your eyes. You once had confidence in me, and then you spoke in a very different strain."

"Once indeed! but then I did not know--"

"No, Rose, it was not what you were then ignorant of; but it was that in those days you loved me."

"Great heavens! I ask you, have I left one stone unturned? Have I not gone from publisher to publisher to sell those songs of my own composing--those songs that you sing so well? I have endeavored to get pupils. What fresh efforts can I try? What would you do, were you in my place? Tell me, I beg you."

And as Paul spoke, he grew more and more excited, while Rose still maintained her manner of exasperating coolness.

"I know not," she replied, after a brief pause; "but if I were a man, I do not think I would permit the woman, for whom I pretended that I had the most sincere affection, to be in want of the actual necessities of life. I would strain every effort to obtain them."

"I have no trade; I am no mechanic," broke in Paul passionately.

"Then I would learn one. Pray how much does a man earn who climbs the ladder with a bricklayer's hod upon his shoulders? It may be hard work, I know, but surely the business is not difficult to learn. You have, or say you have, great musical talents. I say nothing about them; but had I any vocal powers and if there was not a morsel to eat in the house, I would go and sing in the taverns or even in the public streets, and would earn money, and care little for the means by which I made it."

"When you say those things, you seem to forget that I am an honest man."

"One would really suppose that I had suggested some questionable act to you. Your reply, Paul, plainly proves to me that you are one of those who, for want of determination, fall, helpless, by the wayside in the journey of life. They flaunt their rags and tatters in the eyes of the world, and with saddened hearts and empty

stomachs utter the boast, 'I am an honest man.' Do you think that, in order to be rich, you must perforce be a rogue? This is simple imbecility."

She uttered this tirade in clear and vibrant accents, and her eyes gleamed with the fire of savage resolution. Her nature was one of those cruel and energetic ones, which lead a woman to hurl a man from the brink of the abyss to which she had conducted him, and to forget him before he has ever reached the bottom.

This torrent of sarcasm brought out Paul's real nature. His face flushed, and rage began to gain the mastery over him. "Can you not work?" he asked. "Why do you not do something instead of talking so much?"

"That is not at all the same thing," answered she coolly. "I was not made for work."

Paul made a threatening gesture. "You wretch!" exclaimed he.

"You are wrong," she replied. "I am not a wretch; I am simply hungry."

There seemed every prospect of an angry scene, when a slight sound attracted the attention of the disputants, and, turning round, they saw an old man standing upon the threshold of their open door. He was tall, but stooped a good deal. He had high, thick brows, and a red nose; a long, thick, grizzly beard covered the rest of his countenance. He wore a pair of spectacles with colored glasses, which, to a great extent, concealed the expression of his face. His whole attire indicated extreme poverty. He wore a greasy coat, much frayed and torn at the pockets, and which had carried away with it marks of all the walls against which it had been rubbed when he had indulged a little too freely in the cheerful glass. He seemed to belong to that class who consider it a work of supererogation to disrobe before going to bed, and who just turn in on such spot as the fancy of the moment may dictate. Paul and Rose both recognized the old man from having continually met him when ascending or descending the staircase, and knew that he rented the back attic, and was called Daddy Tantaine. In an instant the idea flashed across Paul's mind that the dilapidated state of the partition permitted every word spoken in one attic to be overheard in the other, and this did not tend to soothe his exasperated feelings.

"What do you want here, sir?" asked he angrily. "And, pray, who gave you permission to enter my room without leave?"

The old man did not seem at all put out by the threatening language of his questioner. "I should be telling a fib," answered he calmly, "if I were to tell you that, being in my own room and hearing you quarrelling, I did not hear every word of what you have been saying."

"Sir!"

"Stop a bit, and don't be in such a hurry, my young friend. You seem disposed to quarrel, and, on my faith, I am not surprised; for when there is no corn in the manger, the best tempered horse will bite and kick."

He uttered these words in the most soothing accents, and appeared utterly unconscious of having committed any breach of etiquette in entering the room.

"Well, sir," said Paul, a flush of shame passing across his face, "you see now how poverty can drag a man down. Are you satisfied?"

"Come, come, my young friend," answered Daddy Tantaine, "you should not get angry; and if I did step in without any notice, it was because, as a neighbor, I find

I might venture on such a liberty; for when I heard how embarrassed you were, I said to myself, 'Tantaine, perhaps you can help this pretty pair out of the scrape they have got into.' "

The promise of assistance from a person who had not certainly the outward appearance of a capitalist seemed so ludicrous to Rose that she could not restrain a smile, for she fancied that if their old neighbor was to present them with half his fortune, it might possibly amount to twenty centimes or thereabouts.

Paul had formed a somewhat similar idea, but he was a little touched by this act of friendliness on the part of a man who doubtless knew that money lent under similar circumstances was but seldom returned.

"Ah, sir!" said he, and this time he spoke in softer accents, "what can you possibly do for us?"

"Who can say?"

"You can see how hard we are pushed. We are in want of almost everything. Have we not reached the acme of misery?"

The old man raised his hand to heaven, as if to seek for aid from above.

"You have indeed come to a terrible pass," murmured he; "but all is not yet lost. The pearl which lies in the depths of the ocean is not lost for ever; for may not some skillful diver bring it to the surface? A fisherman may not be able to do much with it, but he knows something of its value, and hands it over to the dealer in precious stones."

He intensified his speech by a little significant laugh, the meaning of which was lost upon the two young people who, though their evil instincts led them to be greedy and covetous, were yet unskilled in the world's ways.

"I should," remarked Paul, "be a fool if I did not accept the offer of your kind assistance."

"There, then, that is right; and now the first thing to do is to have a really good feed. You must get in some wood too, for it is frightfully cold. My old bones are half frozen; and afterward we will talk of a fresh rig out for you both."

"Yes," remarked Rose with a faint sigh; "but to do all that, we want a lot of money."

"Well, how do you know that I can't find it?"

Daddy Tantaine unbuttoned his great coat with grave deliberation, and drew from an inner pocket a small scrap of paper which had been fastened to the lining by a pin. This he unfolded with the greatest of care and laid upon the table.

"A banknote for five hundred francs!" exclaimed Rose, with extreme surprise. Paul did not utter a word. Had he seen the woodwork of the chair upon which he was leaning burst into flower and leaf, he could not have looked more surprised. Who could have expected to find such a sum concealed beneath the old man's tatters, and how could he have obtained so much money? The idea that some robbery had been committed at once occurred to both the young people, and they exchanged a meaning glance, which, however, did not escape the observation of their visitor.

"Pooh, pooh!" said he, without appearing in the slightest degree annoyed. "You must not give way to evil thoughts or suspicions. It is a fact that banknotes for

five hundred francs don't often grow out of a ragged pocket like mine. But I got this fellow honestly,--that I can guarantee."

Rose paid no attention to his words; indeed, she took no interest in them. The note was there, and that was enough for her. She took it up and smoothed it out as though the crisp paper communicated a pleasant sensation to her fingers.

"I must tell you," resumed Daddy Tantine, "that I am employed by a sheriff's officer, and that, in addition, I do a little bill collecting for various persons. By these means I have often comparatively large sums in my possession, and I can lend you five hundred francs for a short time without any inconvenience to myself."

Paul's necessities and conscience were fighting a hard battle, and he remained silent, as a person generally does before arriving at a momentous decision.

At length he broke the silence. "No," said he, "your offer is one that I cannot accept, for I feel--"

"This is no time, my dear Paul, to talk of feelings," interrupted Rose; "besides, can you not see that our refusal to accept the loan annoys this worthy gentleman?"

"The young lady is quite right," returned Daddy Tantine. "Come, let us say that the matter is settled. Go out and get in something to eat, sharp, for it has struck four some time ago."

At these words, Rose started, and a scarlet flush spread over her cheek. "Four o'clock," repeated she, thinking of her letter; but after a moment's reflection she stepped up to the cracked mirror, and arranging her tattered skirts, took up the banknote and left the room.

"She is a rare beauty," remarked Daddy Tantine with the air of one who was an authority in such matters, "and as clever as they make them. Ah! if she had only some one to give her a hint, she might rise to any height."

Paul's ideas were in such a wild state of confusion, that he could make no reply; and, now that he was no longer held in thrall by Rose's presence, he began to be terrified at what had taken place, for he imagined that he caught a sinister expression in the old man's face which made him very suspicious of the wisdom of the course he had been persuaded to pursue. Was there ever such an unheard-of event as an old man of such a poverty-stricken appearance showering banknotes upon the heads of perfect strangers? There was certainly something mysterious in the affair, and Paul made up his mind that he would do his utmost to avoid being compromised.

"I have thought the matter over," said he resolutely; "and it is impossible for me to accept the loan of a sum which it would be difficult for me to repay."

"My dear young friend, that is not the way to talk. If you do not have a good opinion of yourself, all the world will judge you according to your own estimation. Your inexperience has, up to this time, been the sole cause of your failure. Poverty soon changes a boy into a man as straw ripens fruit; but the first thing you must do is to put all confidence in me. You can repay the five hundred francs at your convenience, but I must have six per cent. for my money and your note of hand."

"But really--," began Paul.

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

