
B. L. FARJEON
THE HOUSE OF THE WHITE SHADOWS

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BOOK I.--THE TRIAL OF GAUTRAN.

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CHAPTER I

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ONLY A FLOWER-GIRL.

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The feverish state of excitement into which Geneva was thrown was not caused by a proclamation of war, a royal visit, a social revolution, a religious wave, or an avalanche. It was simply that a man was on his trial for murder.

There is generally in Geneva a rational if not a philosophic foundation for a social upheaving; unlike the people of most other countries, the population do not care to play a blind game of follow my leader. They prefer to think for themselves, and their leaders must be men of mark. Intellect is passionately welcomed; pretenders find their proper level.

What, then, in a simple trial for murder, had caused the excitement? Had the accused moved in a high station, was he a poet, a renowned soldier, a philanthropist, a philosopher, or a priest loved for his charities, and the purity of his life? None of these; he was Gautran, a woodman, and a vagabond of the lowest type. It would be natural, therefore, to seek for an explanation in the social standing of his victim. A princess, probably, or at least a lady of quality? On the contrary. A common flower-girl, who had not two pair of shoes to her feet.

Seldom had a trial taken place in which the interest manifested had been so absorbing. While it was proceeding,

the questions which men and women asked freely of each other were:

"What news from the court-house?"

"How many days longer is it likely to last?"

"Has the monster confessed?"

"What will the verdict be?"

"Do you think it possible he can escape?"

"Why did the famous Advocate undertake the defence?"

In fashionable assemblies, and in *cafés* where the people drank their lager and red wine; in clubs and workshops; on steamboats and diligences; in the fields and vineyards; on high-roads and bye-roads--the trial of Gautran formed the principal topic of conversation and debate, to the almost utter exclusion of trade, and science, and politics, and of a new fashion in hats which was setting the women of adjacent countries crazy. So animated were the discussions that the girl lying in her grave might have been supposed to be closely related to half the inhabitants of Geneva, instead of having been, as she was, a comparative stranger in the town, with no claim upon any living Genevese on the score of kinship. The evidence against the prisoner was overwhelming, and it appeared as though a spirit of personal hatred had guided its preparation. With deadly patience and skill the prosecution had blocked every loophole of escape. Gautran was fast in the meshes, and it was observed that his counsel, the Advocate, in the line he adopted, elicited precisely the kind of evidence which--in the judgment of those who listened to him now for the first time-strengthened the case against the man he was defending.

"Ah," said those observers, "this great Advocate shares the horror of the murderer and his crime, and has undertaken the defence for the purpose of ensuring a conviction."

A conclusion which could only occur to uninformed minds.

There were others--among them the prosecuting counsel, the judge, and the members of the legal profession who thronged the court who, with a better knowledge of the Advocate's marvellous resources, and the subtle quality of his intellect, were inspired with the gravest doubts as to the result of the trial. This remarkable man, who gazed before him with calm, thoughtful eyes, whose face was a mask upon which no trace of inward emotion could be detected, was to them at once a source of perplexity and admiration. Instances were cited of trials in which he had been engaged, in the course of which he had seemed to play so directly into the hands of his antagonists that defeat was not dreamt of until they were startled by the discovery that he had led them into an ambush where, at the supreme moment, victory was snatched from their grasp. And, when it was too late to repair their error, they were galled by the reflection that the Advocate had so blinded their judgment, and so cloaked his designs, that he had compelled them to contribute largely to their own discomfiture.

It was in the acknowledgment of these extraordinary powers that the doubt arose whether Gautran would not slip through the hands of justice. Every feature of the case and the proceedings, whether picturesque or horrible, that afforded scope for illustration by pen and pencil was

pressed into the service of the public--whose appetite for such fare is regarded as immoderate and not over-nice--by special correspondents and artists. Descriptions and sketches of the river and its banks, of the poor home of the unfortunate flower-girl, of the room in which she had slept, of her habits and demeanour, of her dress, of her appearance alive and dead; and, as a contrast, of Gautran and his vile surroundings--not a detail was allowed to escape. It was impossible, without favour or influence, to obtain admission to the court in which the trial was held, and, could seats have been purchased, a higher price would willingly have been paid for them than the most celebrated actress or prima donna could have commanded. Murders are common enough, but this crime had feverishly stirred the heart of the community, and its strangest feature was that the excitement was caused, not so much by the murder itself, as by an accidental connection which imparted to it its unparalleled interest.

The victim was a young girl seventeen years of age, who, until a few months before her cruel and untimely death, had been a stranger in the neighbourhood. Nothing was known of the story of her life. When she first appeared in the suburbs of Geneva she was accompanied by a woman much older than herself, and two facts made themselves immediately apparent. That a strong attachment existed between the new-comers, and that they were very poor. The last circumstance was regarded as a sufficient indication that they belonged to the lower classes. The name of the younger of the women was Madeline, the name of the elder Pauline.

That they became known simply by these names, Madeline and Pauline, was not considered singular by those with whom they consorted; as they presented themselves, so they were accepted. Some said they came from the mountains, some from the plains, but this was guess-work. Their dress did not proclaim their canton, and they brought nothing with them to betray them.

To the question asked of them, "What are you?" Pauline replied, "Cannot you see? We are common working people."

They hired a room in a small cottage for three francs a month, and paid the first month's rent in advance, and their landlady was correct in her surmise that these three francs constituted nearly the whole of their wealth. She was curious to know how they were going to live, for although they called themselves working people, the younger of the two did not seem to be fitted for hard work, or to be accustomed to it.

For a few days they did nothing, and then their choice of avocation was made. They sold flowers in the streets and *cafés* of Geneva, and gained no more than a scanty living thereby.

The woman in whose cottage they lived said she was surprised that they did not make a deal of money, as much because of Madeline's beauty as of their exquisite skill in arranging their posies.

Had Pauline traded alone it is likely that failure would have attended her, for notwithstanding that she was both comely and straight-made, there was always in her eyes the watchful look of one who mistrusts honeyed words from strangers, and sees a snare in complimentary phrases.

It was otherwise with Madeline, in whose young life Nature's fairest season was opening, and it would have been strange indeed if her smiling face and winning manners had not attracted custom. This smiling face and these winning manners were not an intentional part of the trade she followed; they were natural gifts.

Admiration pursued her, not only from those in her own station in life, but from some who occupied a higher, and many an insidious proposal was whispered in her ear whose poisonous flattery would have beguiled her to her ruin. If she had not had in Pauline a staunch and devoted protector, it is hard to say whether she could have resisted temptation, for her nature was singularly gentle and confiding; but her faithful companion was ever on the alert, and no false wooer could hope to win his way to Madeline's heart while Pauline was near.

One gave gold for flowers, and was about to depart with a smile at the success of his first move, when Pauline, with her hand on his sleeve, stopped his way.

"You have made a mistake," she said, tendering the gold; "the flowers you have taken are worth but half-a-franc."

"There is no mistake," he said airily; "the gold is yours for beauty's sake."

"I prefer silver," she said, gazing steadily at him, "for fair dealing's sake."

He took back his gold and gave her silver, with a taunting remark that she was a poor hand at her trade. She made no reply to this, but there was a world of meaning in her eyes as she turned to Madeline with a look of mingled anxiety and tenderness. And yet she desired money, yearningly

desired it, for the sake of her young charge; but she would only earn it honestly, or receive it from those of whom she had a right to ask.

She guarded Madeline as a mother guards her young, and their affection for each other grew into a proverb. Certainly no harm could befall the young flower-girl while Pauline was by her side. Unhappily a day arrived when the elder of the women was called away for a while. They parted with tears and kisses, never to meet again!

CHAPTER II

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THE ARRIVAL OF THE ADVOCATE

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Among those whom Madeline's beauty had attracted was a man in a common way of life, Gautran, a woodman, who followed her with dogged persistence. That his company was distasteful to this bright young creature could not be doubted, but he was not to be shaken off, and his ferocity of character deterred others from approaching the girl when he was present. Many times had he been heard to say, "Madeline belongs to me; let me see who is bold enough to dispute it." And again and again that it would go hard with the man who stepped between him and the girl he loved. Even Pauline was loth to anger him, and seemed to stand in fear of him. This was singular enough, for when he and Madeline were seen together, people would say, "There go the wolf and the lamb."

This wretch it was who stood accused of the murder of the pretty flower-girl.

Her body had been found in the River Rhone, with marks of violence upon it, and a handkerchief tightly twisted round its neck. The proofs of a cruel murder were incontestable, and suspicion fell immediately upon Gautran, who was the last person known to be in Madeline's company. Evidence of his guilt was soon forthcoming. He was madly, brutally in love with her, and madly, brutally jealous of her. On the

night of the murder they had been seen walking together on the bank of the river; Gautran had been heard to speak in a high tone, and his exclamation, "I will kill you! I will kill you!" was sworn to by witnesses; and the handkerchief round her neck belonged to him. A thousand damning details were swiftly accumulated, all pointing to the wretch's guilt, and it was well for him that he did not fall into the hands of the populace. So incensed were they against him that they would have torn him to pieces.

Not in all Geneva could there be found a man or a woman who, by the holding up of a finger, would have besought mercy for him. Regret was openly expressed that the death punishment for murder was not lawful, some satisfaction, however, being derived from the reflection that in times gone by certain heinous crimes had brought upon the criminals a punishment more terrible than death.

"They should chain the monster by the waist," said a man, "so that he cannot lie down, and can only move one step from the stake. Gautran deserves worse than that."

But while he lay in prison, awaiting the day of trial, there arrived in Geneva an Advocate of renown, who had travelled thither with his wife in search of much needed repose from years of continuous mental toil. This man was famous in many countries; he was an indefatigable and earnest worker, and so important were his services deemed that phenomenal fees were frequently paid to secure them. But notwithstanding the exceeding value of his time he had been known to refuse large sums of money in cases offered to him, in order to devote himself to others which held out no prospect of pecuniary reward.

Wealthy, and held in almost exaggerated esteem, both for his abilities and the cold purity of his life, it was confidently predicted that the highest honours of the state were in store for him, and it was ungrudgingly admitted--so far above his peers did he stand--that the loftiest office would be dignified by association with his name. The position he had attained was due as much to his intense enthusiasm in the cause he championed as to his wondrous capacity for guiding it to victory. As leader of a forlorn hope he was unrivalled. He had an insatiable appetite for obstacles; criminal cases of great moment, in which life and liberty were in imminent peril, and in which there was a dark mystery to be solved, possessed an irresistible fascination for him. Labour such as this was a labour of love, and afforded him the keenest pleasure. The more intricate the task the closer his study of it; the deeper the mystery the greater his patience in the unravelling of it; the more powerful the odds against him the more determined his exertions to win the battle. His microscopic, penetrating mind detected the minutest flaw, seized the smallest detail likely to be of advantage to him, and frequently from the most trivial thread he spun a strand so strong as to drag the ship that was falling to pieces to a safe and secure haven. His satisfaction at these achievements was unbounded, but he rarely allowed an expression of exultation to escape him. His outward tranquillity, even in supreme crises, was little less than marvellous. His nerve was of iron, and to his most intimate associates his inner life was a sealed book.

Accompanied by his wife, the Advocate entered Geneva, and alighted at one of the principal hotels, four days before

that on which the trial of Gautran was to commence.

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THE ADVOCATE'S WIFE INSISTS UPON HAVING HER WAY

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Their arrival was expected. The moment they were shown into a private room the proprietor of the hotel waited upon them, and with obsequious bows welcomed them to Geneva.

"A letter has been awaiting my lord," said this magnate, the whiteness of whose linen was dazzling; he had been considering all the morning whether he should address the great Advocate as "your lordship," or "your eminence," or "your highness," and had decided upon the first, "since yesterday evening."

The Advocate in silence received the letter, in silence read it, then handed it to his wife, who also read it, with a careless and supercilious air which deeply impressed the landlord.

"Will my lord and my lady," said this official, "honour us by remaining long in our town? The best rooms in the establishment are at their disposal."

The Advocate glanced at his wife, who answered for him:

"We shall remain for a few hours only."

Despair was expressed in the landlord's face as he left the room, overwhelmed with the desolation caused by this announcement.

The letter which he had delivered to the Advocate ran as follows:

"Comrade, whom I have never seen, but intimately know, Welcome. Were it not that I am a cripple, and physically but half a man--represented, fortunately, by the upper moiety of my body--I should come in person to shake you by the hand. As it is, I must wait till you take up your quarters in Christian Almer's villa in our quiet village, where I spend my days and nights, extracting what amusement I can from the foibles and weaknesses of my neighbours. My father was steward to Christian Almer's father, and I succeeded him, for the reason that the office, during the latter years and after the death of the elder Almer, was a sinecure. Otherwise, another steward would have had to be found, for my labours lay elsewhere. But since the day on which I became a mere bit of animated lumber, unable of my own will to move about, and confined within the narrow limits of this sleepy valley, I have regarded the sinecure as an important slice of good fortune, albeit there was nothing whatever to do except to cause myself to be wheeled past Christian Almer's villa on fine days, for the purpose of satisfying myself that no thief had run away with its rusty gates. Then came an urgent letter from young Almer, whom I have not beheld since he was a lad of nine or ten, begging of me to put the house in order for you and your lady, to whom I, as an old gallant, am already in spirit devoted. And when I heard that it was for you the work was to be done, doubly did I deem myself fortunate in not having thrown up the stewardship in my years of active life. All, then, is ready in the old house,

which will be the more interesting to you from the fact of its not having been inhabited for nearly a generation. Comedies and tragedies have been enacted within its walls, as you doubtless know. Does Christian Almer come with you, and has he grown into the likeness of his father?--Your servant and brother,

"Pierre Lamont."

"Who is this Pierre Lamont?" asked his wife.

"Once a famous lawyer," replied the Advocate; "compelled some years ago to relinquish the pursuit of his profession by reason of an accident which crippled him for life. You do not wish to stop in Geneva, then?"

"No," said the beautiful woman who stood before him, his junior by five-and-twenty years; "there is nothing new to be seen here, and I am dying with impatience to take possession of Mr. Almer's villa. I have been thinking of nothing else for the last week."

"Captivated by the name it bears."

"Perhaps. The House of White Shadows! Could anything be more enticing? Why was it so called?"

"I cannot tell you. Until lately, indeed when this holiday was decided upon"--he sighed as he uttered the word "holiday"; an indication that he was not accepting it in a glad spirit--"I was not aware that Almer owned a villa hereabouts. Do not forget, Adelaide, that he cautioned you against accepting an offer made in a rash moment."

"What more was needed to set me longing for it? 'Here is a very beautiful book,' said Mr. Almer, 'full of wonderful

pictures; it is yours, if you like--but, beware, you must not open it.' Think of saying that to a woman!"

"You are a true daughter of Eve. Almer's offer was unwise; his caution still more unwise."

"The moment he warned me against the villa, I fell in love with it. I shall discover a romance there."

"I, too, would warn you against it----"

"You are but whetting my curiosity," she interrupted playfully.

"Seriously, though. Master Lamont, in his letter, says that the house has not been inhabited for nearly a generation----"

"There must be ghosts there," she said, again interrupting him. "It will be delightful."

"And Master Lamont's remark," continued the Advocate, "that there have been comedies and tragedies enacted within its walls is not a recommendation."

"I have heard you say, Edward, that they are enacted within the walls of the commonest houses."

"But this particular house has been for so long a time deserted! I am in ignorance of the stories attached to it; that they are in some sense unpleasant is proved by Almer's avoidance of the place. What occurs to me is that, were it entirely desirable, Almer would not have made it a point to shun it."

"Christian Almer is different from other men; that is your own opinion of him."

"True; he is a man dominated by sentiment; yet there appears to be something deeper than mere sentiment in his

consistent avoidance of the singularly named House of White Shadows."

"According to Master Lamont's letter he has been to some trouble to make it agreeable to us. Indeed, Edward, you cannot argue me out of having my own way."

"If the house is gloomy, Adelaide----"

"I will brighten it. Can I not?" she asked in a tone so winning that it brought a light into his grave face.

"You can, for me, Adelaide," he replied; "but I am not thinking of myself. I would not willingly sadden a heart as joyous as yours. You must promise, if you are not happy there, to seek with me a more cheerful retreat."

"You can dismiss your fears, Edward. I shall be happy there. All last night I was dreaming of white shadows. Did they sadden me? No. I woke up this morning in delightful spirits. Is that an answer to your forebodings?"

"When did you not contrive to have your own way? I have some banking business to do in Geneva, and I must leave you for an hour." She nodded and smiled at him. Before he reached the door he turned and said: "Are you still resolved to send your maid away? She knows your wants so well, and you are so accustomed to her, that her absence might put you to inconvenience. Had you not better keep her with you till you see whether you are likely to be suited at Almer's house?"

"Edward," she said gaily, "have I not told you a hundred times, and have you not found out for yourself a hundred and a hundred times again, that your wife is a very wilful woman? I shall love to be inconvenienced; it will set my wits to work. But indeed I happen to know that there is a pretty

girl in the villa, the old housekeeper's granddaughter, who was born to do everything I wish done in just the way I wish it done."

"Child of impulse and fancy," he said, kissing her hand, and then her lips, in response to a pouting invitation, "it is well for you that you have a husband as serious as myself to keep guard and watch over you. What is the thought that has suddenly entered your head?"

"Can you read a woman's thoughts?" she asked in her lightest manner.

"I can judge by signs. What was your thought, Adelaide?"

"A foolish thought. To keep guard and watch over me, you said. The things are so different. The first is a proof of love, the second of suspicion."

"A logician, too," he said with a pleased smile; "the air here agrees with you." So saying he left her, and the moment he was beyond the reach of her personal influence his native manner asserted itself, and his features assumed their usual grave expression. As he was descending the stairs of the hotel he was accosted by a woman, the maid he had advised his wife to keep.

"I beg your pardon, sir," she said; "but may I ask why I am discharged?"

"Certainly not of me," he replied stiffly; "you are my wife's servant. She has her reasons."

"She has not made me acquainted with them," said the woman discontentedly. "Will you?"

He saw that she was in an ill-temper, and although he was not a man to tolerate insolence, he was attentive to trifles.

"I do not interfere with my wife's domestics. She engages whom she pleases, and discharges whom she pleases."

"But to do right, sir, that is everyone's affair. I am discharged suddenly, without notice, and without having committed a fault. Until this morning I am perfection; no one can dress my lady like me, no one can arrange her hair so admirably. That is what she says to me continually. Why, then, am I discharged? I ask my lady why, and she says, for her convenience."

"She has paid you, has she not?"

"Oh yes, and has given me money to return home. But it is not that. It is that it hurts me to be suddenly discharged. It is to my injury when I seek another situation. I shall be asked why I left my last. To speak the truth, I must say that I did not leave, that I was discharged. I shall be asked why, and I shall not be able to say."

"Has she not given you a character?"

"Yes; it is not that I complain of; it is being suddenly discharged."

"I cannot interfere, mistress. You have no reasonable cause for complaint. You have a character, and you are well paid; that should content you."

He turned from her, and she sent her parting words after him:

"My lady has her reasons! I hope they will be found to be good ones, and that you will find them so. Do you hear?--that you will find them so!"

He paid no further heed to her, and entering his carriage drove to the Rue de la Corraterie, to the business house of

Jacob Hartrich, and was at once admitted to the banker's private room.

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JACOB HARTRICH, THE BANKER, GIVES HIS REASONS FOR BELIEVING GAUTRAN THE WOODMAN GUILTY OF THE MURDER OF MADELINE

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Jacob Hartrich, by birth a Jew, had reached his sixtieth year, and was as hale and strong as a man of forty. His face was bland and full-fleshed, his eyes bright and, at times, joyous, his voice mellow, his hands fat and finely-shaped, and given to a caressing petting of each other, denoting satisfaction with themselves and the world in general. His manners were easy and self-possessed--a characteristic of his race. He was a gentleman and a man of education.

He gazed at the Advocate with admiration; he had an intense respect for men who had achieved fame by force of intellect.

"Mr. Almer," he said, "prepared me for your arrival, and is anxious that I should forward your views in every possible way. I shall be happy to do so, and, if it is in my power, to contribute to the pleasure of your visit."

"I thank you," said the Advocate, with a courteous inclination of his head. "When did you last see Mr. Almer?"

"He called upon me this day three weeks--for a few minutes only, and only concerning your business."