

The Storyteller

DEBTOR AND CREDITOR

I.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, in the spacious and tastily furnished private office of one of the wealthiest publishers in Paris, two men sat by a cheery fire, engaged in pleasant conversation.

M. Bonneval, the proprietor, was an elderly, stern-looking man, known throughout the city as a model of integrity and exactness in all business relations. Well-meaning but strict and even harsh in his manner, he was both feared and loved by his employees. His companion was Jean Florian, one of the most distinguished and noble-minded French authors of his time.

Florian had just brought to his publisher the manuscript of the second volume of 'Numa Pompilius'; the first, which had already appeared, had met with so flattering a reception that Bonneval gladly welcomed the second.

While they were talking it over, Antoine, the messenger boy of the house, came in, but drew back on seeing his master occupied with Florian.

'Don't mind me, Antoine,' remarked the latter, kindly. 'Business must be attended to before all.' And taking up a book he busied himself with its contents while Antoine delivered to his master the various commissions with which he had been charged.

'What about that bill? Did you not collect it?' asked Bonneval.

'He said he could not pay it, and asked a delay,' was the hesitating reply.

'Again?' said the publisher. 'Then I shall get out a writ against him.'

'But, sir, he told me he had been ill.'

'I am sorry for it,' said Bonneval, more gently, 'but business is business, and accounts must be paid.'

'Who is the man, Antoine?' asked Florian, laying down his book and turning towards the boy.

'He is a painter, sir, from Languedoc.'

'From Languedoc? Then he is a countryman of mine in the strictest sense of the word,' observed Florian. And, turning to the hard-fisted publisher, he added: 'I will be responsible for the debt. How much is it?'

'Twenty-four pounds,' answered the other, rather dryly. 'It is a draft in his name which came to me in the way of business. I do not know the man personally.'

'Well, just deduct the sum from the price of "Numa," my good Bonneval.'

'As you please. I shall, then, write the quittance, and transfer the draft to you?'

'By no means. I do not wish to know your debtor's name, nor that he should know mine. Keep the affair in your own hands. If the poor man be able to pay it later, you will tell me; if not, never mind. But you must promise not to betray my name.'

Florian then left the room, while Antoine looked admiringly after his retreating figure.

Florian was the son of a respectable though poor nobleman in Languedoc. He was born in 1755, and his mother, who was a Spaniard, died before the child was a year old. He often declared that this early bereavement had thrown a shadow over his whole life, and out of love for her memory he learned Spanish. His translations from that tongue are still greatly valued. Early destined by his father to a military career, he was placed in the regiment of the Duke de Penthievre. An excellent discerner of character, the Duke at once recognised Florian's worth, and offered him an honorable post in his household. The young officer accepted it gratefully. His service left him ample time for literary labors, and his salary more than sufficed to meet his wants, so that he was enabled to devote the product of his pen entirely to the works of charity; for Florian was never so happy as when he had it in his power to help his fellowman.

Four weeks had passed, and the worthy poet had completely forgotten the twenty-four pounds; but not so his debtor, Queverdo—a very talented young artist, who had already won some reputation as an engraver. Not aware that his debt was paid, he imagined that Bonneval was still his creditor; and as soon as he could leave his room, after a long and painful illness, he hastened to the publisher to thank him for his forbearance, and request a further delay, as he was still prevented by weakness from working hard.

'Be in perfect peace about it,' said Bonneval. 'I am glad to tell you that it was paid to me four weeks ago; and you can take your time in paying your new creditor.'

'How is that? Who paid it?'

'One who desires to remain unknown. He is an accommodating creditor,' said the publisher smiling. 'I would wager he has forgotten the whole transaction.'

A deep flush tinged Queverdo's pale features.

'But you know,' he insisted, 'that as an artist and a man of honor, while greatly obliged to the gentleman, I cannot accept such a favor from a person unknown to me.'

'He has expressly forbidden me to tell you his name.'

'Then you oblige me to sell my last treasure—a small but very valuable oil painting, which I prize highly—in order to pay this debt.'

'That would be quite contrary to his intention,' answered Bonneval, with a look of displeasure, which soon softened into a feeling of compassion. 'Well, if you must know, it was Florian who took your debt on himself; saying that, as your countryman from Languedoc, he had a right to do so.'

'Florian!' exclaimed Queverdo, visibly relieved. 'I might have guessed it, although I do not know him personally; for he has been a beneficent angel to many artists in my circumstances. I must make his acquaintance as soon as possible, and prove to him that his generosity was not wasted.'

Several months passed, and Queverdo saw his object still unattainable. Florian was at work on his tales, which, if not his most important productions, are certainly charming specimens of talent. He had just finished the first, 'Claudine,' and willingly consented to have it read in the presence of a select circle, as the Duke wished to judge of its effectiveness before sending it to the publisher. Its success exceeded his warmest expectations. All present crowded round him with expressions of rapturous delight; but he valued above all the cordial approval of his princely patron, and of the two young princesses who then graced the little circle: they were the daughter of the Duke de Penthievre, and his daughter-in-law, the beautiful and virtuous Princess de Lamballe, the most faithful friend of the unfortunate Marie Antoinette.

Amongst the listeners was a young page called Alphonse, who stood behind the Duke's chair during the reading. He did not lose a word, and was deeply interested in the tale. His enthusiasm for Florian, whom he had always loved and admired, now grew so intense that he could neither think nor speak of anything but the evening's reading, and the author of the tale which had so charmed him. Florian took great interest in the young page, who was an orphan, with no living relative save an uncle, a captain on half-pay, who resided in a small house near the palace. He was a noted art collector and connoisseur: all his savings were spent on works of art; and Alphonse, whom he loved as a son, shared his tastes, and spent every moment at his disposal with the old man. He was usually accompanied by a beautiful greyhound of Florian's, called Diana. He had taught the sagacious animal all kinds of tricks; so that next to its master he was its favorite, and it obeyed him exactly.

A few days after the reading of 'Claudine,' Alphonse was at his uncle's, when Queverdo entered with a small but valuable picture, the 'Velasquez,' which he asked the old captain to buy. The latter was charmed with the work and inquired its price.

'At any other time I would not give it for less than a hundred ducats,' replied Queverdo; 'but you can have it now for half the sum.' His voice shook slightly, and it was evident that he was reluctant to part with the picture.

'Why do you wish to sell at half its value a picture which you prize so highly?' asked the old man.

The artist told him of his illness, of Florian's generosity, and of his continued inability to meet the debt; adding that the liberality of his friend made the obligation of a prompt payment more binding on a man of honor, so that he at last resolved on parting with the only valuable article in his possession.

'Was it Florian who lent you the twenty-four pounds?' said Alphonse quickly. 'Ah, you know not how grieved he would be if you sacrificed your precious picture to pay him! Allow me to speak to him on the subject—'

'No, no!' interrupted Queverdo. 'For my own peace of mind this debt must be paid, and I have no other way of obtaining the money.'

All were silent for some moments. At last Alphonse began to relate different instances of Florian's generosity and noble-mindedness. His hearers listened with delight, and when the young man told them of the tales he was then engaged on, they were greatly interested. Encouraged by their evident pleasure, Alphonse related the story of 'Claudine' as he had heard it read to the Duke's private circle, and spoke of the pleasure with which it had been received. When he had finished, Queverdo seized his hand:

'If you aid me,' he said, 'I have thought of a way in which to repay Florian and show him my gratitude.'