

CLOSE QUARTERS;

OR, THE HOUSE IN THE RUE BARBETTE

CHAPTER I.

Reginald Brett, barrister-at-law and amateur detective, had seldom been more at peace with the world and his own conscience than when he entered the dining-room of his cosy flat this bright October morning.

Since the famous affair of Lady Delia Lyle's disappearance and death, he had not been busy, and the joy of healthy idleness is only known to the hard worker. Again, while dressing, he had received a letter inviting him to a quiet shoot at a delightful place in the country. All these things blended with happy inconsequence to render Brett contented in mind and affable in manner.

"It's a fine morning, Smith," he said cheerily, as he settled himself at the table where his "man" was already pouring out the coffee.

"Bee-utiful, sir," said Smith.

"Smith!"

"Yessir."

"Not even the best English autumn weather can stand being called 'bee-utiful.' Don't do it. You will open the flood-gates of heaven."

Smith laughed decorously. He had not the slightest idea what his master meant, but if it pleased Mr. Brett to be jocose, it was the duty of a servant who knew his place to be responsive.

The barrister fully understood Smith's delicate appreciation—and its limits. He instantly noticed that the morning paper, instead of reposing next to his folded napkin, was placed out of reach on a sideboard, and that the eggs and bacon made their appearance half a minute too soon.

As an expert swordsman delights to execute a pass en tierce with an umbrella, so did the cleverest analytical detective of the age resolve to amaze his servitor.

"Smith," he said suddenly, composing his features to their most severe cross-examination aspect. "I think the arrangement is an excellent one."

"What arrangement, sir?"

"That Mrs. Smith and yourself should have a few days' holiday, while Mrs. Smith's brother takes your place during my forthcoming visit to Lord Northallerton's—why, man, what is the matter? Is it too hot?"—for the cover Smith had lifted off the bacon and eggs clattered violently on the table.

"Ot, sir. 'Ot isn't the word. You're a fair lick, that's what you are."

Smith invariably dropped his h's when he became excited.

"Smith, I insist that you shall not call me names. Pass the paper."

"But, sir—"

"Pass the paper. Utter another word and I refuse to accept Mr. Smith's brother as your locum tenens."

Smith was silenced by the last terrible epithet. Yet he was so manifestly nervous that Brett resolved to enlighten him before plunging into the day's news.

"For the last time, Smith," he said, "I will explain to you why it is hopeless for you to think of concealing tradesmen's commissions from me."

The shot went home, but the enemy was acquainted with this method of attack, and did not wince.

"You knew that Lord Northallerton had recently invited me to his October pheasant-shooting. During the last few days a youth, who grotesquely reproduces Mrs. Smith's most prominent features, has mysteriously tenanted the kitchen, ill-cleaned my boots, and bungled over the studs in my shirts. This morning a letter came with the crest and the Northallerton postmark. Really, Smith, considering that you have now breathed the same air as myself for eight long years, I did not expect to be called on for an explanation. Besides, you have destroyed a masterpiece."

"Sir—" began Smith.

"Oh, I understand; there is nothing broken but your reputation. Don't you see that the mere placing of the newspaper at a distance, so that you might have a chance to speak before I opened it, was a subtle stroke, worthy of Lecoca. Yet you demand feeble words. What a pity! Know, Smith, that true genius is dumb. Speech may

be silvern, but silence is surely golden."

The barrister solemnly unfolded the paper, and Smith faded from the room. On a page usually devoted to important announcements, the following paragraphs stood forth in the boldness of leaded type:—

"MYSTERIOUS OCCURRENCE IN THE WEST END."

"An affair of some magnitude—perhaps a remarkable crime—has taken place in an Albert Gate mansion.

"Owing to the reticence of the authorities, it is at present impossible to arrive at a definite conclusion as to the nature or extent of the incident, but it is quite certain that public interest will be much excited when details are forthcoming. All sorts of rumors attain credence in the locality, the murder of several prominent persons being not the least persistent of these. Without, however, giving currency to idle speculation several authentic statements may be grouped into a connected form.

"Four weeks ago a party of Turkish gentlemen of high rank in Constantinople, arrived in London and took up their abode in the house in question, after some structural alterations, pointing at great security within and without, had been planned and executed.

"Attending these Turkish gentlemen, or officials, was a numerous suite of Moslem guards and servants, whilst, immediately following their arrival, came from Amsterdam some dozen noted experts in the diamond-cutting industry. These were lodged in a neighboring private hotel, where they were extremely uncommunicative as to their business in London. They were employed during the day at the Albert Gate house. The presence in the mansion, both day and night, of a strong force of Metropolitan police, tended to excite local curiosity to an intense degree, but no clear conception of the business of the occupants was allowed to reach the public.

"Whatever it was that took place, the full particulars were not only well known to the authorities—the presence of the police hints even at Governmental sanction—but matters proceeded on normal lines until yesterday morning.

"Then it became clear that a remarkable development must have occurred during the preceding night, as the whole of the Dutch workmen and the Turkish attendants were taken-off in cabs by the police, not to Morton Street Police Station, but to Scotland Yard; this in itself being a most unusual course to adopt. They are unquestionably detained in custody, but they have not yet been charged before a magistrate.

"The police, later in the day, carried off some of these men's personal belongings, from both hotel and mansion.

"A sinister aspect was given to the foregoing mysterious proceedings by the presence at Albert Gate, early in the day, of two police surgeons, who were followed, about twelve o'clock, by Dr. Tennyson Coke, the greatest living authority on toxicology.

"Dr. Coke and the other medical gentlemen subsequently refused to impart the slightest information as to the reasons that led the police to seek their services, and the Scotland Yard authorities are adamant in the matter.

"The representative of a news agency was threatened with arrest for trespass when he endeavored to gain admission to the Albert Gate house, and it is quite evident that the police are determined to prevent the facts from leaking out at present—if they can by any means accomplish their wishes."

Brett read this interesting statement twice slowly. It fascinated him. Its very vagueness, its admissions of inability to tell what had really happened, its adroit use of such phrases as "Turkish gentlemen of high rank," "Noted experts in the diamond-cutting industry," "The greatest living authority on toxicology," betrayed the hand of the disappointed journalistic artist.

"Excellent!" he murmured aloud. "It is the breath of battle to my nostrils. I ought to tip Smith for my breakfast. Had I

read this earlier, I would not have eaten a morsel."

He carefully examined the page at the back. It contained matter of no consequence—a London County Council debate—so he took a pair of scissors from his pocket and cut out the complete item, placing the slip as a votive offering in front of a finely executed bust of Edgar Allen Poe, that stood on a bookcase behind him.

Within three minutes the scissors were again employed. The new cutting ran—

"There is trouble at Yildiz Kiosk. A Reuter's telegram from Constantinople states that a near relative of the Sultan has fled to France. The Porte have asked the French Government to apprehend him, but the French Ambassador has informed Riez Pasha that this course is impracticable in the absence of any criminal charge."

"These two are one," said the barrister, as he turned towards Poe's bust and laid the slip by the side of its predecessor. This time he had mutilated a critique of an Ibsenite drama.

The rest of the newspaper's contents had no special interest for him, and he soon threw aside the journal in order to rise, light a cigarette, and muster sufficient energy to write a telegram accepting Lord Northallerton's invitation for the following day.

He was on the point of reaching for a telegraph form when Smith entered with a card. It bore the name and address—

"The Earl of Fairholme, Stanhope Gate."

"Curious," thought Brett, "Where is his lordship?" he said aloud—"at the door, or in the street?"

(His flat was on the second floor.)

"In a keb, sir."

"Bring his lordship up."

A rapid glance at "Debrett" revealed that the Earl of Fairholme was thirty, unmarried, the fourteenth of his line, and the possessor of country seats at Fairholme, Warwickshire, and Glen Spey, Inverness.

The earl entered, an athletic, well-groomed man, one whose lines were usually cast in pleasant places, but who was now in an unwonted state of flurry and annoyance.

Each man was favorably impressed by the other. His lordship produced an introductory card, and Brett was astonished to find that it bore the name of the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

"I have come—" commenced his lordship hesitatingly.

But the barrister broke in. "You have had a bad night, Lord Fairholme. You wish for a long and comfortable chat. Now, won't you start with a whisky and soda, light a cigar, and draw an easy chair near the fire?"

"Pon my honor, Mr. Brett, you begin well. You give me confidence. Those are the first cheerful words I have heard during twenty-four hours."

The earl was easily manoeuvred into a strong light. Then he made a fresh start.

"You have doubtless heard of this Albert Gate affair, Mr. Brett?"

"You mean this?" said the other, rising and handing to his visitor the longer paragraph of the two he had selected from the newspaper.

"That is very curious," said the earl, momentarily startled. But he was too preoccupied by his thoughts to pay much heed to the incident. He merely glanced at the cutting and went on:

"Yes, that is it. Well, Edith—Miss Talbot, I mean—yows that she won't marry me until this beastly business is cleared up. Of course, we all know that Jack didn't slope with the diamonds. He's tied up or dead, for sure. But—no matter what may have become of him—why the dickens that should stop Edith from marrying me is more than I can fathom. Just look at some of the women in Society. They don't leave it to their relatives to be mixed up in a scandal, I can tell you. Still, there you are. Edith is jolly clever and awfully determined, so you've got to find him, Mr. Brett. Dead or alive, he must be found, and cleared."

"He shall," said Brett, gazing into the fire.

The quiet, self-reliant voice steadied the young peer. He checked an imminent flow of words, picked up the newspaper slip again, and this time read it. Then he blushed.

"You must think me very stupid, Mr. Brett, to burst out in such a manner when you probably have never heard of the people I am talking about."

"You will tell me, Lord Fairholme, if you get quietly to work, and try to speak, so far as you find

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it possible, in chronological sequence."

(To be continued.)

WHITEWASH BRUSH IN SPAIN.

Great Leveller of Distinctions Between the Rich and Poor.

In Spain, where the ruins of Moorish towers are seen upon the crests of many hills as the "express" train crawls along at the rate of 15 or 20 miles an hour, the evidences of surviving Moorish influence upon the people and customs of Andalusia make an interesting study. In the city of Ronda it is plain that the ideas of home building which the Arabs brought into the Iberian peninsula remain vital to-day.

The whitewash brush is the great leveller of distinctions between the rich and the poor in Spain. The exteriors of homes, great manor houses upon the haciendas, huts of mountaineers clinging to the sides of the almost perpendicular hills, handsome homes of rich merchants in the cities and humble tenements are nearly all of plaster.

A few of them are kalsomined in blue or brown or pink, but the majority are pure white. Ronda is a white city with a few patches of blue and pink and looks as if the whitewash brush had just been applied.

PITHY SAYINGS.

About the only time a man objects to being overrated is when he pays his taxes.

The great trouble with the men who get to the front is that they feel so big we can't see over their heads.

Clothes may not make the man, but they sometimes make a dangerous imitation.

The only proof against disappointment is to expect the unexpected.

The fellow who was born with a silver spoon in his mouth generally marries a girl who makes him fork over.

The friend who takes your part sometimes forgets to return it.

Some people have such taking ways that they leave little to be desired.

If lots of us made it a rule to pay as we go we wouldn't get very far.

LEPERS NOT INCREASING.

"The leper colony in Hawaii has not grown any the last several years," says O. B. Thomas, of Honolulu. "In fact the number of lepers confined on the island of Molokai has been decreased by the discovery that some of them were not suffering from the disease. The district in which the lepers live is separated from the mainland by a high range of mountains, and the lepers have a regular municipal government of their own. They have their schools and their amusements and pursue their daily work with as much pleasure and industry as the inhabitants of thriving villages."

DATES BACK TO CHARLES II

Few women are aware that the word "miss," as indicating an unmarried woman, dates from the time of Charles II. John Evelyn, in his famous "diary," writes of young girls as "misses, as they begin to be called." Until that reign even a small girl was addressed as "mistress," like her mother. It was found, however, inconvenient to use so little distinction between a girl and a woman, and so the word "miss" was invented, as a diminutive of "mistress," servants retaining the old form of address.

WHERE IS TZE HSI'S GOLD?

A Story to Account for the Treasure of Empress Dowager.

A legend as persistent as those clustered around the whereabouts of Oom Paul's gold is growing up in the Far East. It concerns the mystery surrounding the disposition made of the great treasure of the late Empress Dowager of China, Tze Hsi.

That the remarkable old woman of China died with a tremendous fortune is perhaps the only accurate part of the story. Besides being very much of a diplomat she was thrifty, and the gold and jewels that poured into her coffers she kept. Only a few trusted servants that had stood closest in her confidence knew the amount of her private fortune and what disposition she made of it during her lifetime.

Hardly had the blue and white streamers of mourning gone up over the lintel of every doorpost in China at her death when whispers about the Dowager Empress's hidden treasure began to buzz. It was said in Peking that she had left directions that her gold and jewels should never be disturbed in their hiding place, and that three men alone knew where that hiding place was.

Then came the rumor that one of these three eunuchs of the palace had murdered the two other possessors of the secret and had fled the country with part of the treasure in his possession. So persistent was this report that a year ago, when a Chinaman was murdered in Patani in the Malay States and among his effects were found some jades of remarkable beauty and value, it was instantly decided that the plunderer of the imperial cache had met his end.

Now a new tale comes out of the East, less romantic to be sure, but a bit more probable. This version has it that all of Tze Hsi's wealth, aside from the gems she used as personal adornment, had been assembled in the shape of bullion while the Dowager Empress was still alive and that it had remained under guard in a room of the palace in Peking after her death. Some time ago representations were made to the councillors of the Prince Regent of the danger of allowing so great a treasure to remain in Peking and the folly of not banking it so that interest might accrue.

The Prince Regent gave permission to remove the gold bars to a Brussels bank. Various insurance agents were sought to give rates for the protection of the gold on its long journey, but finally the imperial councillors decided to send the bullion to London and thence to Brussels at the Government's own risk. It was forwarded piecemeal, so that no word of the rich shipment might escape. The last of it, so it is reported in the North China Daily News, went to England on the Chinese cruiser Haichi, which went to represent the empire at the coronation.

FEMALE POLICE IN BERLIN.

A body of women police has been mustered in Berlin, Germany. One section will devote their attention to ordinary police work, and to the other portion will be entrusted the care of infants. It is essential that the guardians of the children possess a knowledge of medicine. The women constables will be armed with revolvers, so that they will be able to protect themselves if necessary when entering houses in the lower quarters of the city where they have suspicion that children are being ill-treated. Thirty women will be engaged at the start.

If a word to the wise is sufficient the average married woman must consider her husband foolish indeed.