

CLOSE QUARTERS;

OR, THE HOUSE IN THE RUE BARBETTE

CHAPTER XII.—(Cont'd)

Beaucaire came a step nearer. Clearly he did not recall the barrister's face. He knew well that his daughter's attainments were not such as to command the eager search of London theatrical managers, yet he was assured that the individual who now addressed him was not an ordinary music-hall agent, hunting up fees.

"I regret," he said, "that mademoiselle is not professionally engaged at this moment. Indeed, she has not appeared in public for some months. May I ask how monsieur came to hear of her name?"

"It is the easiest matter in the world," said Brett with his ready smile, producing his note-book and rapidly turning over the leaves. "I have here the names and addresses of a large number of artists whom I was recommended to visit. Mademoiselle's name was given to me among others at the Cirque d'Hiver, where I heard most encouraging accounts of her skill. You see, monsieur," he went on, "that in England the public are not acquainted with any other language than their own and when Continental artists are engaged we prefer those whose performance consists chiefly of acrobatic or other feats in which dialogue is unnecessary."

The barrister's ready explanation was sufficient. Nevertheless Beaucaire was puzzled. But even the most vulgar or brutal Frenchman is endowed with a certain amount of politeness, and in this instance Gros Jean felt that his visitor should be treated deferentially.

"I am most sorry," he cried, "to be unable to assist monsieur any further. If, however, you leave me your address I will communicate with you after I have heard from my daughter. I have no doubt that she will readily come to terms."

"I think you said that mademoiselle was in the South of France?" observed Brett casually.

Instantly Beaucaire became suspicious again.

"No," he replied shortly; "I do not think I said so."

"Of course not," laughed Brett. "How foolish of me! It was I who mentioned the South of France, was it not? You see that French is a foreign language to me, and I do not express myself very easily."

Beaucaire grinned politely again: "Permit me to congratulate monsieur upon both his pronunciation and facility. Not many Englishmen speak French as he does."

The barrister was determined not to allow the conversation to end too rapidly. He wished to note more carefully the details of this interesting household. Pulling out his cigar-case, he offered it to Gros Jean with the remark, "Your small French tables seem curious to my eyes after long acquaintance with English billiards. Are any of these gentlemen here skilled players in your fashion?"

"Oh, yes," said the innkeeper. "Andre there, for instance, can make big breaks. I have seen him make forty consecutive coups. Will you not take a seat for a little while and observe the play?"

"With pleasure." And Brett confirmed the favorable opinion formed of him by ordering refreshments for Beaucaire and himself. He apparently took a keen interest in the game, and applauded the manner in which the Frenchman scored a series of difficult cannons.

Meanwhile he noted that between the private passage from the bar and the public one that led from the light of day could not possibly penetrate. He was certain that no door communicated with it from the public passage, and he could not remember having passed one that first afternoon when La Belle Chasseuse brought him and Fairholme into the billiard-room to display her prowess as a marks-woman.

Probably the Cafe Noir had no cellars. The place might serve as a store room. This natural hypothesis was upset by the appearance of the waiter, who passed through the billiard-room and opened another door at the further end, through which he soon emerged carrying a fresh supply of bottles.

"It is obvious," said Brett to himself, "that if there is no door communicating with the private passage, then the only way in which

that room can be reached is by a ladder from the top. Now I wonder why that should be necessary?"

He remained in the billiard-room some twenty minutes. When Gros Jean was called on some momentary errand to the front of the house he took his departure, purposely making the mistake of quitting the room by the wrong exit. At the same instant he struck a match to relight his cigar, and while the expert billiard player, Andre, ran after him to direct him as to the right way he rapidly surveyed the passage. The plaster walls were smooth and unbroken on their inner side, affording no doorway exit.

Apologizing to Andre with a laugh, he then sauntered towards the front cafe, where he purchased another drink at the counter. He assured himself that he had not been mistaken. The only private door out of the bar led into the passage, so that the room beyond could only be reached by a staircase or through a trap-door.

"I have learned something, at any rate," he murmured as he passed out into the Boulevard, "and I imagine that my knowledge is not shared by the Paris police. Mademoiselle would have acted more wisely had she not yielded to impulse, and reserved her shooting display for a more dramatic occasion."

Brett kept his appointment with the commissary next morning. That worthy official set himself to the congenial task of examining a prisoner with the air of one who said: "Now you will see what manner of man I am. Here I am on my native heath."

He consulted bulky volumes, made notes, fussily called up various subordinates, both in person and by speaking-tube, and generally conducted himself with a business-like air that much amused the barrister, who, however, for his own purposes took care to appear greatly impressed.

At last all was ready, and the captive of the Rue Barbette was introduced.

This precocious personage had recovered his self-possession and natural impudence during the night. By the commissary's instructions, he had been well supplied with estates, and the restrictions as to persons under detention were relaxed, to permit him to enjoy a supply of his much-loved cigarettes. Consequently, the little thief was restored to his usual state of jaunty cheekiness.

The first part of the interrogation, which promptly ensued, was not strange to him.

"Your name?" said the commissary.

"Charles Petit."

"Abode?"

"Changeable. Of late I have dwelt in the Cabaret Noir Boulevard de Montmartre."

"You are generally known as 'The Worm'?"

"That is so."

"You have served periods of imprisonment, and have paid over 400 francs in fines?"

"I have not kept count, but I suppose it is all written down there." And he jerked his thumb towards the conviction book on the commissary's desk.

"You are a noted thief, and you obtained your nickname by reason of your dexterity in picking locks

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and climbing through scullery windows?"

"If you say so, monsieur, your words cannot be disputed."

"Very well." The commissary scratched a few lines on a memorandum tablet. Then he suddenly raised his quick eyes and fastened them on the prisoner with the direct question—

"How came you to be detained in such an extraordinary manner in the house, No. 11, Rue Barbette, yesterday?"

A vacant and stolid expression intended to convey an idea of utter innocence came over "The Worm's" face.

"Believe me, monsieur," he said, "I cannot give you the slightest explanation of that extraordinary incident."

"Indeed! You surprise me. I suppose you wish me to understand that you casually strolled in out of the street and were set upon by three Turks, who gagged you and bound you with leather thongs, leaving you to starve quietly to death if you had not been rescued by reason of a chance visit paid to the place by myself and others?"

"I assure you, monsieur, that, strange as it may seem, you have almost related the facts. I went to the place in question with a very ordinary message from a Turkish gentleman with whom I have a slight acquaintance. The other Turks listened to me with the gravity peculiar to their nation, and then, before I could offer a word of remonstrance, treated me exactly as you saw."

"And what time did you go there?"

"It must have been nearly three o'clock, the day before yesterday," was the answer.

"And what message did you bring?"

"I was told to ask the Turkish gentlemen to be good enough to cross the Pont Neuf exactly at half-past six, when they would meet a friend who desired to give some information to them."

"Oh! come now," said the commissary, with a knowing smile, "that will not do, Petit. You are far too old a hand to convey such a childish message as that. What reason can you have for seeking to shield these men who treated you in a barbarous way and left you to die a cruel death?"

"On my honor—" began the thief melodramatically, but Brett here interrupted the conversation.

"Will you allow me," he said to the commissary, "to put a few questions to this man?" "Certainly," was the answer.

"Now listen," said Brett, sternly gazing at the truculent little rascal with those searching eyes of his which seemed to reach to the very spine. "It is useless for you to attempt any further prevarication. We know exactly who are your confederates. You are acquainted with a large number of the gang that frequents the Cafe Noir. Do not forget that I was present when you tried to palm off on Husseinul-Mulk the false diamonds, which

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"No, don't interrupt me," he continued with even greater emphasis, when "Le Ver" tried to break in. "You will tell me that you merely acted as the agent of others, and that you yourself are not conscious of the nature of any crime that has been committed. I know that to be so. You have been made a mere tool. You are the cat, simply employed by the monkey to pull the chestnuts out of the fire, and you have only succeeded in getting your own paws burnt. Your sole chance of safety now is to inform the commissary and me exactly how you came to be mixed up with this affair."

"I assure you, gentlemen," he cried, "that with respect to the Turks I have no knowledge whatever of their pursuits or motives. I was present when this English gentleman here was debating with them, and I understood that they even went so far as to use threats against him. My mission was to give to the leaders of the Turks a

package which I did not even know contained diamonds, either genuine or false. No one could be more surprised than myself when the Turkish gentleman produced them."

"Who sent you there with the diamonds?" said Brett.

"Even that I cannot tell you," said Petit. "It was a mere chance affair. I was seated in a cafe sipping some absinthe when a man asked me if I would execute a small commission for him. He explained that it was to deliver a parcel at a house not five minutes distant, and—"

"I see," interrupted Brett, with the cynical smile which so often disconcerted glib liars like Petit. "It is hopeless to expect you to tell the truth. However, I think I know a way to clear your wits. You must be brought face to face with La Belle Chasseuse. Perhaps when you are confronted with that lady in the room between the cafe and billiard saloon of the Carabet Noir—"

"The Worm" gasped out brokenly—

"Pardon, monsieur! I will tell you everything!"

The man's face had absolutely become livid as he listened to the barrister's words.

(To be continued.)

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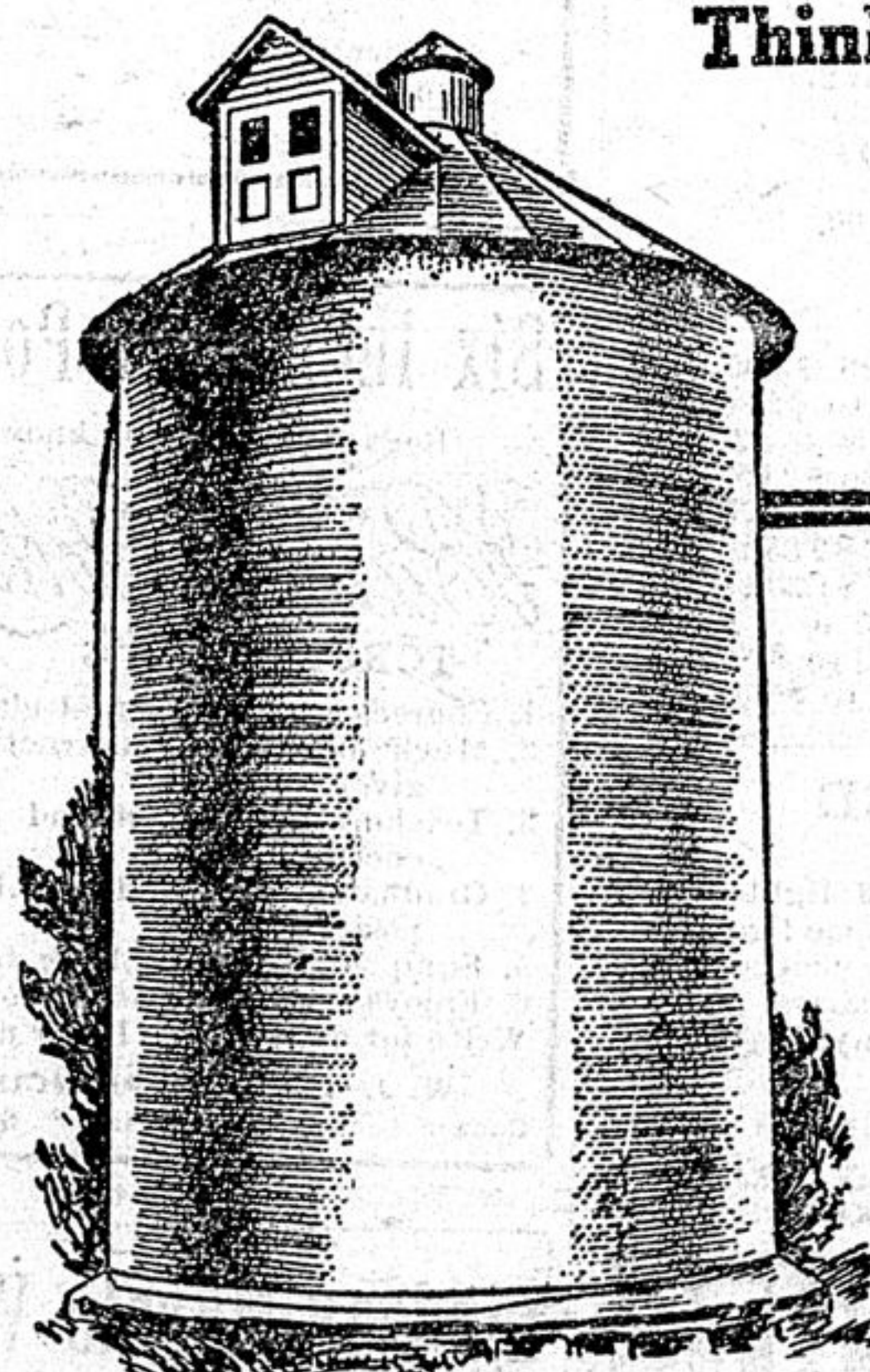
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