

CLOSE QUARTERS;

OR, THE HOUSE IN THE RUE BARBETTE

CHAPTER XIII.—(Cont'd)

"Thank you," he replied simply. "I certainly took every precaution that suggested itself to me. Subsequently I was the victim of circumstances. The French-speaking Turk, as I have told you, took no part whatever in the negotiations, and when he became aware of the modus operandi determined upon—

"By the way," said Brett, "how did he become aware of it?"

"Oh, Mehemet Ali told him in French."

"Didn't that strike you as curious?"

"Most certainly it did. But the scoundrel explained it afterwards by telling me that although a Turkish subject, he had lived in Algiers and France since he was a child, and had quite forgotten his mother tongue. But he was employed in a confidential position in the Turkish Embassy at Paris, owing not only to family influence, but to his intimate acquaintance with the French language."

"Ah!" said Brett, "Monsieur Henri Dubois has a ready wit."

"What!" cried Edith, who naturally enough was following each word with the utmost interest, "do you already know his name?"

"Not only his name," replied Brett, "but his identity, Miss Talbot. You shall see him in another skin and without the sword-cut. It is possible, however, that before we meet, this distinguishing mark may be replaced by a fractured skull or a bullet wound."

Fairholme suddenly clenched his right fist and examined his knuckles, his unconscious action causing the others to laugh.

"Is he a Frenchman, then?" said Talbot.

"Unquestionably—a most modern product."

"And his name is Dubois?"

"Yes."

"All right. In future I will allude to him by his proper title. Well, Monsieur Debois strolled towards me with the easy confidence of a man who was sure of himself."

"This affair bores me," he said.

"I see no reason why I, who am in no way concerned with the Sultan's collection of precious stones, should sit up all night keeping guard over them with these very earnest gentlemen here. I am going to my hotel. I have sent my portmanteau to the Carlton. Will you honor me by driving there and telling me something about your wonderful London as we go?"

"The man looked at me with a meaning in his eyes that conveyed the intimation—

"We can talk quietly in the cab, and I can explain much that is at present hidden." Unfortunately I fell in with his suggestions.

"We crossed the dining-room together. We were searched by the police in the hall, much to his apparent surprise, and then we drove off through St. George's Place."

"He at once aroused my curiosity by telling me sensational details of a widespread plot to dethrone the Sultan. An essential part of the conspiracy was to obtain possession of the diamonds before they had been cut, as they were an heirloom from the Prophet, and it would be a terrible thing in the eyes of the more fanatical section of the Mohammedans if they were tampered with in any way."

"This sounded reasonable enough, as the same story had been dinned in my ears for several weeks."

"At last we reached the Carlton. We got out and he paid the cabman, who drove off round the corner; then my new acquaintance explained to me that he placed no greater trust in his fellow-countrymen than did their ruler. Therefore he had led them to believe he was staying at that hotel, whereas he had in reality taken up his abode in the flat of a French family with whom he was acquainted. If I would come with him for a moment he promised to place me in possession of certain documents which would render easy my explanations to the Foreign Office next morning."

"I accompanied him without hesitation, secure in the knowledge that a strong force of police guarded my charge at Albert Gate, both inside and outside the house. We went to the mansions where he said he lived. The place had a perfectly respectable exterior, and is situated, as you know, in a reputable thoroughfare. We ascended to the second floor, entered the flat, and were ushered by a middle-aged Frenchwoman into a sort of sitting-room."

"Dubois turned to a writing-desk and unlocked a drawer."

"Here are the documents I promised you, Mr. Talbot," he said; but, to my amazement, he whipped out a revolver and held it within two feet of my breast."

"If you move, or attempt to cry out, you are a dead man!"

"At the same instant a door behind me opened and some three or four persons entered. I was so furious at the trick that had been played upon me that I disregarded his threat and sprang at him, but he did not fire. Flinging the revolver behind him on the writing-table he closed with me. Before I well knew what had happened I was tied hand and foot, gagged, and placed helpless in a chair. A few minutes later, after a muttered consultation between my captors, I was taken to the room in which Fairholme found me, and I never left the place until nearly nine o'clock last night."

"It was a most ghastly experience. I would sooner die than go through it again."

"If ever I get within measurable distance of Monsieur Henri Dubois I promise you that I will repay him with interest some of the agony he inflicted on me. I never thought I should hate a man as I hate that Frenchman. I do not want to kill him. I want to torture him!"

This was the first sign that Talbot had given of the anger that filled his soul. For a moment no one spoke. Edith stifled a sob, and Sir Hubert Fitzjames broke the tension of swearing as vehemently as ever did the army in Flanders."

"You have suffered," said Brett quietly, "but not in vain. It is only by the manner in which these blackguards treated you that we have obtained so much knowledge. Your capture was a necessary part of their scheme. I wonder now that after you had served their purpose they did not kill you. It was not out of pity, believe me. The fact that you were spared confirms me in the opinion that the Albert Gate murders were a gigantic blunder, never contemplated by the expert criminal who planned the theft. But continue. What happened afterwards?"

Talbot almost summoned up a smile as he said—

"At last I fell asleep, dozing fitfully at first, but finally giving way to the deep slumber of exhaustion."

"I was awakened by some one shaking me, though not roughly. It took me some time to recover my scattered senses, and at first I was unable to move, owing to the constrained position of my limbs. As well as I could judge, it was not yet daylight, for the electric lamps were turned on, and I subsequently found that such rays of natural light as penetrated into my room during the day did not arrive for a considerable time."

"Thenceforth, of course, my sole method of judging the progress of time was by the alteration of meals and the difference of light between day and night."

"Some one assisted me to assume a sitting posture, the cords at tached to my wrists were relaxed, and I was firmly held by two men—one a Turk whom I had not seen before, the other a Frenchman whom you found in the flat."

"At the foot of the bed were standing Dubois and a closely veiled female—a young woman, as well as I could judge, and a person of tall and elegant stature, who, it would appear, spoke only French."

"Dubois addressed me calmly."

"I hope," he said, "you are in a better temper, my dear Talbot!"

"It does not appear to me that the state of my temper is of any material significance," I answered. "No," he replied nonchalantly. "The game is in my hands, and will probably remain there for a considerable period. But I do not wish to be unkind. You have, I am given to understand, a highly respectable uncle and a very charming sister, who will no doubt suffer much perturbation owing to your mysterious disappearance. Now, you may not think it, but I am a very humane sort of fellow. Consequently, I am quite agreeable that you should write them a brief note, omitting of course all superfluous information, such as dates, addresses, and other embarrassing facts, but simply telling them that you are well. I will guarantee its safe delivery."

"Naturally I jumped at the offer."

"The veiled lady supplied me with a sheet of notepaper and an envelope, and I scribbled the unfortunate letter which was subsequently posted in Paris and caused such a sensation. I had only one hand at liberty, so Dubois politely offered to seal the envelope for me, first, however, reading carefully what I had written."

"That is quite correct," he said; "it will relieve their feelings and prove at the same time highly serviceable to me, as the letter will be posted in Paris and not in London. You see, my dear Talbot, how readily you fall in my plans. You are as putty in my hands. Now, I suppose being a brave Englishman, you would sooner have died than written this letter if you had guessed it would prove of material assistance to me?"

"I fear I used some very bad language to Dubois, notwithstanding the presence of the lady, but he paid little heed to me, and the pair at once undertook the most curious proceedings I have ever witnessed."

"They had before them a table set out with all sorts of paint, paste and powders, such as one might expect to find on an actor's dressing-room."

"Setting himself astride a chair so that the light fell on his face, Dubois submitted himself to the skilful hands of the woman who forthwith began to make him up in an exact resemblance to me. The right side of his face was towards me, but when, in obedience to her requirements, he turned somewhat, I noticed to my astonishment that the scar which I have mentioned had completely disappeared, and then I saw that his Turkish complexion had also vanished, leaving him a particularly white-skinned Frenchman, with a high color."

"The lady proceeded with her work in the most business-like fashion, and to my intense amazement he quickly assumed a marked resemblance to myself. Not such, perhaps as would bear close scrutiny, but rather the effect attained by a skilful artist in a rapid sketch, or caught by a fleeting glance whilst passing a mirror."

"What is the game now?" I cried, when the true nature of their purpose dawned upon me."

"Oh, just the same," replied Dubois, grinning, "I merely wish to puzzle the thick-headed brains of you Englishmen a little more. That is all."

"Hulloa!" I cried, "you understand English?"

"Yes, he answered coolly. 'It is frequently necessary in my business.'"

"Well," I said, "there can be no doubt that you are an accomplished villain. What you intend to achieve by masquerading in this fashion I utterly fail to understand. You can never be such a fool as to think that you will be able to gain admittance to Albert Gate by impersonating me. Were you even to succeed you would still be as far off as ever from securing your booty, which, I suppose, is the Imperial diamond and its companions."

"Really," he said, with a sneer, "I thought that you, Mr. Talbot, were endowed with a little more intelligence than the average. Pardon, Mignon, pour un moment."

"He rose from his chair, unfastened a case which he took from the breast-pocket of his overcoat, and showed me the diamonds which had been the object of so much care and solicitude on my part during many weeks."

"You see," he continued, seating himself again, whilst the lady resumed her task without a word, "the business has been satisfactorily accomplished, Mr. Talbot. The diamonds are here; so are you. Unfortunately his Excellency and the secretaries are with the Prophet. You will, I am sure, express my regrets to the police, to the Foreign Office, and to all concerned, that the Sultan's commissioners should have been so unceremoniously despatched to Paradise. It was not my fault, believe me, nor was it altogether necessary. I am in no way responsible for the bung-

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ling measures adopted by my Turkish assistants. You see, in Constantinople they are accustomed to these drastic means of settling disputes."

"He rattled on so pleasantly that I hardly grasped the true significance of his words, so I replied with almost equal flippancy:

"I will be most pleased to convey your regrets to the proper authorities. May I ask when I shall be at liberty to do so?"

"Ah," he said, "there you puzzle even my intelligence. It will certainly be days, it may be weeks, before you can communicate with your friends."

"A sudden frenzy seized me at those words, and I endeavored to smash the heads of my two gaolers together by throwing them off their balance outwards, and then rapidly contracting my arms. Thereupon I made another discovery. A cord lying loosely round my neck was suddenly tightened, and I was thrown back choking. A fourth man, of whose presence I was unconscious, was stationed behind me and held the noose in his hands."

"It was some time before I recovered my breath or my speech."

"At last I was allowed to rise again, and Dubois said with a content smile which was intensely irritating—

"By this time, Mr. Talbot, you should have realized that you have not fallen into the hands of children. We do not wish to do you a mischief. Indeed, it would not suit our purpose. It is far from our desire to quarrel with the British Government or to take the life of one of its rising young diplomatists. The dispute in which you are unfortunately involved is between a certain section of the Sultan's subjects and that potentate himself. But really you must recognize the absolute helplessness of your position. You have just received a stern reminder. Let it be the last, for if you give us any more trouble we may end a difficult situation by effectively cutting your throat. Such an operation would be distasteful to us and most distressing to you. So please do not compel us to perform it."

"I glared at him viciously. Speak I could not, but he paid no further attention to me, and his make-up was now pronounced to be perfect by his critical companion."

"Vous etes un tres bel Anglais, mon vieux," she cried, coquettishly setting her head on one side and glancing first at him and then at me."

"The cat!" cried Edith. "She evidently thought you good-looking, Jack."

Talbot blushed and laughed at the involuntary slip.

"I am not responsible for her opinions," he said. "I am simply telling you what happened."

"Dubois left the room," he continued, "and returned in a few moments dressed in an English tweed suit, with my overcoat and a deer-stalker cap. Upon my honor, he so like me that, notwithstanding my rage, I was compelled to smile at him. He caught my transient mood for an instant."

"Tiens!" he cried, "that is better. The surgical operation is beginning to take effect. You see the joke?"

"It is a somewhat bitter species of humor," I replied. "Perhaps in the future it may have a sequel."

"Life is made up of sequels," was the airy answer. "Events generally turn out to be so completely opposite to that which I anticipated that I no longer give them a thought. I live only for the present, and at this moment I am victorious. But now, Mr. Talbot, I purpose taking a little trip to the Continent on your account. I hope, therefore, for your sake, that the Channel will be smooth."

IT TOOK PRACTICE.

Kathryn—"I don't see why they need so many rehearsals for the Sarah Strongarm and Percy Pinfeather wedding."

Kitty—"That's so they won't laugh when she promises to obey him."

Royal Bank of Canada Had Record Year

Net Profits amounted to 18.58% on Stock, while Liquid Assets now stand at 49½% of Total Liabilities to the Public.

Once more The Royal Bank of Canada is able to report in its Forty-second Annual Statement all previous records broken.

Deposits increased over \$16,000,000, which brings the total up to \$88,294,000. Liquid assets amount to \$47,738,000, being 49½ per cent of the total liabilities to the public. Actual cash on hand, balances on deposit with other banks, and call loans in New York and London, England, exceed 32 per cent. of the total liabilities to the public. Total assets increased during the year from \$92,510,000 to \$110,528,000. Net profits amounted to \$1,152,249, showing an increase of \$200,913 over the previous year—equal to 18.58 per cent. on the capital stock of \$6,200,000. Commercial loans amount to \$59,646,000, being 67.55 per cent. of the deposits.

As will be seen from these comparisons, the Bank has experienced a wonderfully prosperous year.

KITCHENER IN EGYPT.

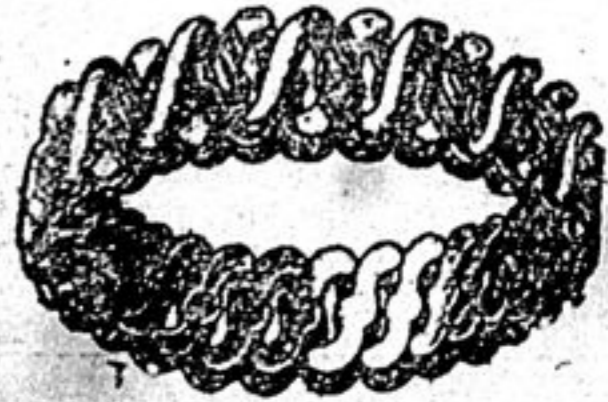
He Has Become Quite a Collector of Old China.

Word comes from Cairo that Lord Kitchener is delighting the hearts of the curio dealers. Scarcely a day passes that his motor car is not seen standing outside one of the celebrated shops in the Muski and the city, and there is consequently much jubilation in these quarters.

Not that the dealers derive much profit from these visits, for the ex-Sirdar, while he knows a good thing when he sees it, also understands how to drive a bargain in a typical native manner. But this attention from the British agent is in a way an advertisement for them, and they welcome his visits, for there is nothing they delight in more than dealing with a man who not only knows the value of every article and can parry their tricks, but also can bandy words with them in their own tongue.

It came as a surprise to English people some years ago when it was discovered that Lord Kitchener was an expert collector of odd china. It was thought that his nature was far too adamant to admit the softer arts and graces. After the china, however, they are prepared to hear of the Egyptian curios.

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