

CLOSE QUARTERS ;

OR, THE HOUSE IN THE RUE BARBETTE

CHAPTER XVI.—(Cont'd)

He held up his hand to wish her good-night, but she demanded with some surprise, "What are you going to do? Surely you want some sleep."

"I will remain here," he said. "I have bribed the hall-porter to keep awake, and I may be wanted on the telephone at any moment."

Left to himself, Brett again interviewed the hall-porter and returned to the sitting-room, where he disposed himself for a nap on the sofa. Like all men who possess the faculty of concentrated thought, he also cultivated the power of dismissing a perplexing problem from his mind until it became necessary to consider it afresh in the light of further knowledge.

Within five minutes he was sound asleep.

At length he woke with a start. He was stiff with cold, for the fire had gone out, and the tiny gas jet he had left burning was not sufficient to warm the room. He sprang to his feet and looked at his watch. It was half-past six.

"Surely," he cried, "there must have been a message from Paris long before this!"

He ran downstairs, encountering on his way some of the hotel servants, who even thus early had commenced work, for your industrious Frenchmen is no laggard in the morning. Going to the hall-porter's office he found that functionary snoring peacefully. The poor fellow was evidently tired out, and twenty telephone bells might have jangled in his ears without waking him.

So, for the third time, Brett rang up the exchange to get in touch with Paris. As he had anticipated, he quickly learnt that the Prefecture had endeavored to get through to him about 4.30 a.m., but the operators were unable to obtain any answer.

"I can hardly blame the man," said he to himself, "for I was just as tired as he."

The information he received from the Prefecture was startling enough. In accordance with his instructions, a number of detectives had raided the Cabaret Noir soon after three o'clock. They found the place in possession of a waiter and couple of female servants. Gros Jean had quitted the house the previous evening, and, most astounding fact of all, with him were three Turks.

Neither the waiter nor the domestics could give any information whatever concerning the hidden room. They knew of its existence, but none of them had ever seen it, and the place was generally regarded as a sort of cellar for the reception of lumber.

The police forced a padlock which guarded its trap-door, and found to their surprise that the place was much more spacious than they anticipated. It really contained two apartments, one of which was so firmly secured that it had hitherto resisted all their efforts to open it. The other was a sort of bed-sitting room, and it had recently been occupied. From various indications they came to the conclusion that its latest tenants were Hussein-ul-Mulk and his confederates.

Judging from the facts that these gentry had quietly left the cafe in Gros Jean's company about half-past seven the previous evening, they were not in confinement against their will. In fact, the police theory was that this secret chamber proved a safe retreat for any person who desired complete

seclusion other than that provided by the authorities.

"It is assumed," said the officer who communicated this bewildering information to Brett, "that the locked room contains a quantity of stolen goods. The police remain in charge of the cafe, and when the necessary workmen have been obtained this morning the door will be forced. We will at once let you know the result of our further investigations."

"But what about Gros Jean and the Turks? Surely Paris cannot again have swallowed them up?" inquired Brett.

"Every effort is being made to trace their whereabouts," was the reply; "but you must remember, monsieur, that they had many hours' start of the police, and that this period of the day is the most difficult of the twenty-four hours in which to make successful inquiries. You must rest assured that the moment we receive even the slightest clue we will ring you up, provided, that is, you arrange for some one at your end to answer the telephone."

"Oh," said Brett with a laugh, "there is little fear of future delay in that respect. It will be daylight in another hour, and the servants are already busy about the place."

He rang off and then darted back to his sitting-room to consult a time-table, for the thought came to him that Gros Jean and the Turks had quitted the cafe in order to reach Marseilles.

"He could not yet explain this strange alliance. It was impossible to believe that the innkeeper would betray his daughter to serve the ends of a political party. No; there must be some other explanation which the future alone could reveal.

He well knew that the last thought likely to occur to the Paris police would be to suspect the missing men of any desire to reach the south coast. It was with an almost feverish anxiety that he scrutinized the pages of the *indicateur des chemins de fer*, and he heaved a sigh of profound relief when he discovered that the first train Gros Jean and the Turks could travel by left Paris the previous evening, and was not due at Marseilles until 8.59 that morning.

It was now close on seven o'clock, so he went to his bedroom, effected some much-needed changes in his personal appearance, and then consumed an early breakfast of coffee and rolls. At half-past eight he called a carriage and was driven to the railway station, where, punctually to the minute, the Paris train arrived.

Brett managed to secure a favorable point whence he could observe the passengers without being seen, for on the platform were stacked hundreds of baskets of fruit and vegetables which had arrived by a local train.

There were not many passengers in the express, and among the first to alight were Gros Jean and the three Turks—Hussein-ul-Mulk and the two others he had seen in the Rue Barbette.

It would be idle to deny that the barrister experienced a thrill of satisfaction at his own shrewdness, and he smiled as he realized the consternation of the Paris commissioner when informed that he had so easily allowed the rogues to slip out of the net.

The travellers were evidently tired after a sleepless journey. Gros Jean, being a fat man, had wobbled about a great deal during the night. He much needed the restorative effect of a comfortable bed; whilst the Turks, though younger and more active, also showed signs of fatigue, for this long journey, in their case, was a sequel to many hours of detention in an ill-ventilated apartment.

So they paid not the slightest heed to their whereabouts, save in so far as to eye with suspicion a harmless gendarme who happened to be on the platform.

The policeman, of course, took no notice of them whatever. Gros Jean was to him merely a typical Frenchman, whilst persons of dark complexion and Moorish appearance are everyday sights in Marseilles.

A diminutive railway porter loitered near Brett in the conceit that perhaps this well-dressed stranger

might have felonious designs on the oranges and cabbages. His intense joy may therefore be pictured when the barrister beckoned to him, placed a gold piece in his hand, and said—

"You see those Turks there. Go after them and find out where they are going. They are sure to take a carriage, as their luggage appears to be somewhat heavy."

The man darted off, secure in the belief that no one who could afford to give away twenty francs for such trivial information would be likely to pocket a cauliflower. In half a minute he returned.

"They have all driven off together, monsieur," he announced eagerly, "and the French gentleman first of all inquired of the driver how much he would charge to take them to the Jolies Femmes. Two francs was the fare, and this was agreeable, so they have gone there."

"I hope, in this instance," said Brett gravely, "that the Jolies Femmes is the name of a hotel."

"But certainly," replied the porter elevating his eyebrows.

He meditated on this question for five minutes after Brett's departure, and then an idea struck him.

"Ah," he cried, slapping his thigh with a grin, "he is a droll dog, that Englishman."

Brett, secure in the knowledge that his quarry had been located, drove back to the hostelry. He found Edith, Fairholme, and Talbot just sitting down to breakfast. He joined them, and had barely communicated his startling intelligence when Sir Hubert Fitzjames put in an appearance.

"Dear me," said the genial old soldier, smiling pleasantly at the assembled party. "I see you are all nearly as lazy as I have been

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myself. I hope you slept well and enjoyed a quiet night."

The burst of merriment which greeted this remark not only amazed the worthy baronet, but startled the other guests in the dining-room. "That is a strange thing," whispered a Frenchman to his wife. "I thought the English never laughed!"

CHAPTER XVII.

After breakfast the party ad-

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journed to their sitting-room, and there Brett detailed his immediate plan of action.

"The first point to determine is an important one," he said. "Which of you three—Sir Hubert Fitzjames, Talbot, or Fairholme—looks most like a Frenchman?"

The trio at once began to scrutinize each other carefully, to Edith's intense amazement.

Jack delayed the selection by inquiring—

"May I ask, Brett, why you wish one of us to haul down the British flag?"

"Because it is necessary that some one should keep a close eye on Gros Jean and the Turks. Sir Hubert Fitzjames might possibly be made up to represent un vieux moustache, but it is essential that he should speak French well."

"Then," cried Sir Hubert decisively, "I am out of court, because my French is weak, and I always want to go off into Hindustani whenever I open my mouth."

"Very well," concurred the barrister, "it comes back to you, Talbot, and I regret to inform you that for the next few hours you must

be content with the inferior cooking and accommodation of the Jolies Femmes Hotel. If you will come out with me now I will get you rigged up in a cheap French suit. That, and a supply of bad cigarettes, will provide a sufficient disguise for your purpose. You must pack a few belongings in a green tin box and betake yourself to the Jolies Femmes. Do not make any inquiries about Gros Jean. Simply watch him."

(To be continued.)

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