

# CLOSE QUARTERS;

OR, THE HOUSE IN THE RUE BARBETTE

## CHAPTER XVIII.—(Cont'd)

I decided instantly that it would be hopeless to try to get close to them if they halted at any other point save in the vicinity of the turret. Elsewhere I must remain too far away to catch any portion of their conversation. So I darted across and entered the turret, noting on my way up the stairs the existence of the loopholed window where you finally saw me. It would never do to be caught there, so I went to the top and peeped over. You can guess how delighted I was when they came straight across and settled themselves in the angle beneath. Then I crept half-way down the stairs and leaned as far as I dared through the loophole, being just in time to hear Gros Jean read a letter from his daughter. Fortunately the innkeeper had to speak plainly, as his companions were foreigners, and for the same reason I had no difficulty in catching the drift of what the Turks said.

"The letter was quite short. It told him that H. had decided to leave France, and had made arrangements to proceed at once to Palermo, whether the writer would accompany him.

"One sentence I remember exactly: 'H.' she wrote, 'has friends in Sicily, and he feels assured of a kind reception at their hands.'"

"Friends!" interrupted Brett. "That means brigands!"

"The information seemed to annoy the Turks very much. They were very angry at what they described as the enforced delay, and discussed with Gros Jean the quickest means of reaching Palermo forthwith. Then he told them that he had endeavored to find out the trains running through Italy to Messina, but they could not leave Marseilles until to-night, and he thought it best that they should have a quiet talk on the situation before deciding too hurriedly upon any line of action.

"The rest of their conversation was inconsequent and desultory, alluding evidently to some project which they had fully discussed before."

Brett smiled grimly. "The commissary in Paris always follows up the wrong person," he said. "Had he only used his wits yesterday morning he would have discovered that the agent of the Embassy was in touch with Hussein-ul-Mulk. Hence the presence of the quartette in Marseilles to-day."

Talbot was naturally mystified by this remark until Brett explained to him the circumstances already known to the reader.

"Was there anything else?" inquired the barrister, reverting to the chief topic before them.

"Only this. I gathered that Gros Jean did not know his daughter's whereabouts in Marseilles, but she had arranged that if circumstances necessitated her departure from the town she would leave a letter for him in the Poste Restante, giving him full details. Nevertheless, this presupposes the knowledge on her part that he would come to Marseilles, so I assume therefore that telegrams must have passed between them yesterday afternoon."

"Obviously!" said Brett. "Anything else?"

"Yes," and now Talbot's voice took a note of passion that momentarily surprised his hearers. "It seems to me that this under-handed arrangement, if it goes through, condones the murder of poor Mehemet Ali and his assistants, and places on me the everlasting disgrace of having permitted this thing to happen whilst an important and special mission was entrusted to my sole charge by the Foreign Office. Dubois has been able to commit his crime, get away with the diamonds, hoodwink all of us most effectually, and, in the result, obtain a huge reward from the Turkish Government for his services. I tell you, Mr. Brett, I won't put up with it. I will follow him to the other end of the world, and, at any rate, take personal vengeance on the man who has ruined my career. For, no matter what you say, the only effective way in which I can rehabilitate myself with my superiors is to hand back those diamonds to the custody of the Foreign Office. No matter how the panic-stricken sovereign in Yildiz Kiosk may sacrifice his servants to gain his own ends, I, at least, have to higher mo-

tive. It rests with me to prove that the British Government is not to be humbugged by Paris thieves or Turkish agitators. If I fail in that duty there remains to me the personal motive of revenge!

"No, Edith; it is useless to argue with me," for his sister had risen and placed her arms lovingly round his neck in the effort to calm him. "My mind is made up. I suppose Mr. Brett feels that his inquiry is ended. For me it has just commenced."

The young man's justifiable rage created a sensation.

"May I ask," he said, "what reason you have to suppose that I should so readily throw up the sponge and leave Monsieur Henri Dubois the victor in this contest?"

"Do you mean," cried Talbot, starting to his feet, "that you will stand by me?"

"Stand by you!" echoed the barrister, himself yielding for an instant to the electrical condition of things. "Of course I will. We will recover those diamonds and bring them back with us to London if we have to take them out of the Sultan's palace itself!"

"And now, Lord Fairholme," he added, before Talbot could do other than grasp his hand and shake it impulsively, "we want your friend's yacht. We will set out for Palermo at the first possible moment. We must reach there many hours, perhaps a whole day, before Dubois, who is on a sailing vessel, and even with the start he has obtained cannot hope to equal the performance of a fast steamer. Let Gros Jean and his Turks travel overland. We will beat them, too. Come, now, no more talk, but action. You, Fairholme, go ahead and prepare Daubeney. I will see to your luggage being packed. Talbot and I will join in half an hour."

"Eh! what is that?" broke in Sir Hubert. "Fairholme, Talbot, you—what are Edith and I going to do?"

"Mr. Brett, of course," said Edith, in her steady, even tones, "did not trouble to include us, uncle, because we shall be on the yacht first. A woman can always pack up much better than a man, you know, and I will look after you, dear."

Brett gave one glance at her flushed and smiling face, and forthwith abandoned argument as useless.

An hour later the Blue Bell was skimming past the outer lighthouse in Marseilles bay.

## CHAPTER XIX.

Next morning they reached the Straits of Bonifacio, and here they had to slacken speed somewhat, for the navigation of the rocky channel was difficult and dangerous. Far behind them they could see a huge steamer approaching. As the morning wore, this vessel came nearer, and Daubeney, important now in his capacity of commander, announced that she was the P. and O. steamship Ganges, bound for Brindisi and the East, via the Straits of Messina.

"She left Marseilles at a late hour last night," he said, "and will call at Brindisi for the Indian mails."

An idea suddenly struck Brett. "Do you know how fast she is steaming?" he inquired.

"Oh, about thirteen and a half knots an hour. That is her best rate. The P. and O. boats are not flyers, you know."

"And does she stop at Messina?" Daubeney now caught the drift of the barrister's questions.

"I don't think so."

Another hour passed, and the Ganges was now almost alongside. Although both ships were well through the Straits of Bonifacio, and the Ganges should have followed a course a point or two north of that pursued by the Blue Bell, she appeared to be desirous to come close to them.

Suddenly the reason became apparent. A line of little flags fluttered up to her masthead.

"She is signalling us," cried Daubeney excitedly. "Here you," he shouted to a sailor, "bring Jones here at once!"

Jones was the yacht's expert signaller. He approached with a telescope and a code under his arm. After a prolonged gaze and a careful scrutiny of the code, he announced—

"This is how the message reads:

"Turks on board Stopping Messina.—Winter."

For once the barrister was startled out of his usual quiet self-possession.

"Winter!" he almost screamed. "Is he there?"

A hundred mad questions coursed through his brain, but he realized that to attempt a long explanation by signals was not only out of the question, but could not fail to attract the attention of passengers on board the Ganges. This he did not desire to do. Quick as lightning, he decided that by some inexplicable means the Scotland Yard detective had reached Marseilles full of the knowledge that Dubois and the diamonds were en route to Sicily, and had also learnt that he, Brett, and the others were on board the Blue Bell.

He had evidently taken the speediest means of reaching the island, and found himself on board the same ship as Gros Jean and the Turks. Hence he had approached the captain with the request that the Blue Bell should be signalled.

"What shall we answer?" said Daubeney, breaking in upon the barrister's train of thought.

"Oh, say that the signal is fully understood."

Whilst the answering flags were being displayed Daubeney asked—

"What does it all mean?"

"It means," said Brett, "that if the Blue Bell has another yard of speed in her engines we shall need it all. It perhaps will make no material difference in the long run, but as a mere matter of pride I should like to reach Palermo before Gros Jean. If I remember rightly, Palermo is six hours from Messina by rail. Can we do it?"

"Mac," the chief engineer, was consulted. Of course, he would not commit himself.

"We will try darned ha-r-r-d," he said.

And with this emphatic resolve the Blue Bell sped onwards through the sunlit sea until, late in the evening, the Ganges was hull down on her quarter.

Macpherson came on deck to take a last look at the P. and O.

"It will be a great race," he announced, "and I may have to kill a stoker. But—"

Then he dived below again.

The Blue Bell ran merrily on until the small hours of morning, when everybody on board was suddenly awakened by the stoppage of the screw.

The passengers on board the Blue Bell one and all found some pretext to gain the deck in their eagerness to find out why the vessel had slowed down. The answer was a reassuring one. She had burnt a flare for a pilot, and quickly an answering gleam came from afar out of the darkness ahead.

The pilot was soon on board. He was an Italian, but, like most members of his profession doing business in these waters, he spoke French fluently.

Brett asked him how long, with the north-easterly breeze then blowing, a small sailing vessel, such as a schooner-rigged fishing-smack, would take to reach Palermo from Marseilles.

"It is a trip not often made, monsieur," he said. "Fishing vessels from Marseilles are frequently compelled to take shelter under the lee of Corsica or even Sardinia, but here—in Sicily—why should they come here?"

"Oh, I don't mean a schooner engaged in the fishing trade, but rather a small vessel chartered for pleasure, taking the place, as it were, of a private yacht."

"Ah," said the Italian, "that explains it. Well, monsieur, with this breeze I should imagine they would set their course round by the north of Corsica in order to avoid beating through the Straits of Bonifacio. That would make the run about 650 knots, and a smart little vessel carrying all her sails and properly ballasted, might reach Palermo in a few hours over three days."

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"Thank you," said Brett. "Is Palermo a difficult port to make?"

"Oh no, monsieur. There is deep water all round here, no shoals, and but few isolated rocks, which are all well known. The only thing to guard against is the changeful current. Brett smiled.

"It would be an ignoble conclusion to the chase if the Belles Soeurs were wrecked with her valuable cargo. I most devoutly pray," he said to himself, "that the breezes and currents may combine to bring Dubois safely on shore. Then I think we can deal with him."

Soon after daybreak the Blue Bell, after a momentary halt at the Customs Station, crept past the Castello a Mare, and amidst much gesticulation, accompanied by a torrent of volcanic Italian, she was tied up to a wharf in the Cala—the small inner harbor of the port.

Edith, who could not sleep since the advent of the pilot, made an early toilet and climbed to the bridge, whence she had a magnificent view of the sunrise over the beautiful city that stands on the Conca d'Ora, or Golden Shell—the smiling and luxuriant plain that seems to be provided by Nature for man's habitation.

Naturally Fairholme was drawn to her side.

"Italy is a fine country," he remarked. "Yet there are more murders to the square inch there than in any other place on earth."

Edith laughed. "Really, Bobby," she pouted, "you are becoming sentimental. I half expect to find you break out into verse."

"I can do that, too," she said, "though it is not my own. Hasn't

Heber got a hymn which tells us of a place where

Every prospect pleases,  
And only man is vile.

I forget the rest of it."

Miss Talbot faced him rapidly.

"Bobby, what is the matter with you? I never knew you in such a melting mood before."

"How can I help it?" he half-whispered, laying his hand on her shoulder. "We have never been together so much before in our lives. Don't you realize, Edith, what it means to us if Mr. Brett discovers those diamonds within the next few hours or days?"

He bent closer towards her and his hand passed from her shoulder round her neck. "When we return to England, if you are willing, we can be married within a week."

A bright flush suffused her beautiful face. She bent her head and was silent. It is quite certain that Fairholme would have kissed her had not Daubeney shouted—

(To be continued.)

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