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CLOSE QUARTERS;

OR, THE HOUSE IN THE RUE BARBETTE

CHAPTER VI.

The sight of Talbot's letter seemed to fire Brett's imagination. He radiated electric energy. Both Lord Fairholme and Miss Talbot felt that in his presence all doubts vanished. They realized, without knowledge why, that this man of power, this human dynamo, would quickly dispel the clouds which now rendered the outlook so forbidding. For the moment, heedless of their presence, he began to pace the room in the strenuous concentration of his thoughts. Once he halted in front of the small bust of Edgar Allan Poe, whose pedestal still imprisoned the two cuttings of a newspaper which formed the barrister's first links with the tragedy. His ideas suddenly reverted to the paragraph describing the efforts of the Porte to obtain from the French Government the extradition of a fugitive relative of the Sultan. At that instant, too, a tiny clock on the mantelpiece chimed forth the hour of eight.

"That settles it," said Brett aloud. "Smith," he vociferated.

And Smith appeared.

"Pack up sufficient belongings for a short trip to the Continent. Don't forget a rug and a great-coat. Have the portmanteau on a cab at the door within three minutes."

"I am sorry, Miss Talbot," he continued, with his charming smile and a manner as free from perplexity as if he was announcing a formal visit to his grandmother. "I have just decided to go to Paris at once. The train leaves Victoria at 8.15. Lord Fairholme will take you home, and you will both, I am sure, be able to convince Sir Hubert that to yield too greatly to anxiety just now is to suffer needless pain."

He rattled on so pleasantly that Edith, absorbed by the agony of her brother's disappearance and possible disgrace, could not conceal an expression of blank amazement at his levity.

Brett instantly became apologetic.

"Pray forgive my apparent flippancy, Miss Talbot," he said. "I am really in earnest. I believe that a flying visit to Paris just now must unquestionably advance us an important stage in this inquiry. Let me explain exactly what I mean. Here is a letter from your brother, in handwriting which you and others best qualified to judge declare to be undeniably his. It also bears post-marks which would demonstrate to a court of law that it was posted in Paris last night and received here to-day. But it does not follow that it was written in Paris; it might have been written anywhere. Now, according to the police, there is no entry in the visitors' book at the Grand Hotel which appears to prove that your brother wrote his name therein on Tuesday night. If the handwriting in the Grand Hotel register corresponds beyond all doubt with that in this letter and envelope, then your brother must be in Paris. If it does not, he is not there. I am convinced that the latter hypothesis is correct, but to make doubly sure I will go and see with my own eyes. There now—I owed you an explanation, and I have barely time to catch my train. Good-bye. I will wire you in the morning."

He placed the mysterious letter in his notebook, gave them a parting smile, and was gone.

He managed to catch the 8.15, which started punctually, the sole remnant of railway virtue possessed by the Chatham and South Eastern line. A restful porter, quickened into active life by a half-crown tip, found him a vacant seat in a first-class smoking carriage, and Brett's hasty glance round the compartment revealed that his travelling companions, as far as Dover, at any rate, were severely respectable Britons bound for the Riviera.

The harbor station at Dover wore its unusual aspect of dejected misery.

A stiff breeze had brought up a moderate sea, and the barrister bumped down his bag and flung himself into a chair on what a novice would regard as the weather side of the charthouse. He bore the discomfort for a few minutes, and was rewarded for his foresight by possessing the most sequestered nook on deck when the vessel turned her head seawards and began one of the shortest, but perhaps the most disagreeable, voyages in the world.

Having retained his seat long enough to establish a proprietory right therein, Brett rose and made a short tour of the ship. To distinguish any one on deck was almost out of the question. The passengers were huddled up in indefinable shapes, and there was hardly light sufficient to effect a stumbling progress over the multitude of hand-baggage. So the barrister dived down the companion-way and cannoned against a burley individual who had propped himself against a bulkhead on the main deck saloon.

Something hard in the man's pockets gave Brett a sharp rap, and when they separated with mutual apologies, he laughed silently.

"Handcuffs!" he murmured. "Scotland Yard is always prepared for emergencies. I will wager a considerable sum that as soon as Winters reached headquarters his story about the letter caused a telegram to be dispatched to Dover. Here's a detective bound for Paris and prepared to manacle Talbot the moment he sees him. What a fearful and wonderful thing is the English police system. A crime, obviously clever in its conception and treatment, can be handled by a sharp policeman wearing regulation boots and armed with handcuffs. Really. I must have a drink."

Clinging to the hand-rails and executing some crude but effective balancing feats, he reached the dining saloon.

Near the bar, solemnly digesting a liqueur, stood a man to whom the choppy sea evidently gave no concern. He had the square shoulders, neat-fitting clothes and closely clipped appearance at the back of the neck which mark the British officer; but he also stood square on his feet and swayed with unconscious ease whether the vessel pitched or rolled or executed the combined movement.

"Now, I wonder," said Brett, "if that is Captain Gaultier. He must be. Gaultier, from his name, should be a Jersey man, hence his facility in foreign languages and his employment as a Foreign Office messenger. It's worth trying. I will make the experiment."

He reached the bar and ordered a whiskey and soda. Turning affably to the stranger, he remarked:

"Nasty night, isn't it? I hope we shan't be much behind time."

The stranger glanced at him with sharp and inquisitive eyes, but the glance evidently reassured him, for he replied quite pleasantly:

"Oh, no. A matter of a few minutes, perhaps. They usually manage to make up any delay after we leave Calais."

"That's good," said Brett, "because I want to be in Paris at the earliest possible moment."

The other man smiled.

"We are due there at 5.38," he said. "Rather an early hour for business, isn't it?"

"Well, yes," assented the barrister, "under ordinary circumstances, but as my only business in Paris is to examine an hotel register and then get something to eat before I return, I do not wish to waste time unnecessarily on the road."

The other man nodded affably, but gave no sign of further interest.

"So," communed Brett, "if it be Gaultier, he has not heard the latest developments. I must try a frontal attack."

"Does your name happen to be Gaultier?" he went on.

The stranger arrested his liqueur glass in the final tilt.

"It does," he said; "but I do not think I have the pleasure of knowing you."

"No," said Brett, "you haven't."

"Well?" said the other man.

"The fact is," said Brett, "I heard you had been in London. I guessed from your appearance that you might be a King's messenger, and it was just possible that the Captain Gaultier in whom I was interested might start back to the Continent to-night, so I put two and two together, don't you see, with the result that they make four, a thing which doesn't always happen in deduction if in mathematics."

Captain Gaultier eyed his questioner with some degree of stern suspicion as he said from behind his cigar—

"May I ask who you are?"

"Certainly," replied Brett, producing his card.

After a quick glance at the pasteboard Gaultier continued—

"I suppose, Mr. Brett, you have some motive in addressing me? What is it?"

"I am interested in the fate of a man named Talbot," was the straightforward reply, "and as you told the Under-Secretary that you had seen Talbot crossing to Paris in company with a lady last Tuesday, I hoped that perhaps you would not mind discussing the matter with me."

Captain Gaultier was evidently puzzled. Private conversations with Under-Secretaries of State are not, as a rule, public property, and his momentary intention to decline further conversation with this good-looking and fascinating stranger was checked by remembrance of the fact.

"Really, Mr. Brett," he said, "although I do not question the accuracy of your statement, you will readily understand that I can hardly discuss the matter with you under the circumstances."

Gaultier clearly hesitated, but did not refuse to accept the Under-Secretary's letter which Brett handed to him, with the words—

"You know the handwriting, no doubt?"

"That speaks for itself." The King's messenger smiled when he returned the note. "It is an odd coincidence," he added, "and still more curious that you should spot me so readily. However, Mr. Brett, we have now cleared the air. What can I do for you?"

"Simply this," said the barrister; "do you mind telling me how you came to recognize Mr. Talbot?"

"Well, for one thing," was the thoughtful reply, "I knew his overcoat. I often met Talbot in the Foreign Office, and one day he drove me to his club wearing a very handsome coat lined with astrachan. It struck me as a peculiarly comfortable and well-fitting one, and although there are plenty of men about town who may possess astrachan coats, it is a reasonable assumption that this was the identical garment when it happened to be worn by the man himself."

"Then you are quite certain it was Talbot?" went on the barrister.

"Quite certain."

"Would you swear it was he, though his life depended on your—"

"No, no," interrupted the other. "I rather had a good look at his coat—and the lady. Who ever the man was, he appeared to be wrapped up in both of them, and he certainly did not court observation. I naturally thought that the feminine attachment accounted for this, and for the same reason, I did not even seek to scrutinize him too closely. To put the thing in a nutshell, I saw a man whom I believed to be Jack Talbot—and who certainly resembled him in face and figure—attired in Talbot's clothes, and wearing a coat which I had noted so particularly as to be able to describe it to my tailor when ordering a similar one. Add to that the appearance of an attractive lady, young and unknown, and you have my soul laid bare to you in the matter."

"Thank you," said Brett. "I am much obliged."

(To be continued.)

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