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CLOSE QUARTERS;

OR, THE HOUSE IN THE RUE BARBETTE

CHAPTER VII.

Brett was called at ten o'clock. After reinvigorating himself with a bath and a hearty breakfast, he was ready to meet Captain Gaultier, who arrived promptly at 11.30.

"Come to my room," said Brett. "There we will be able to talk without interruption."

Once comfortably seated, Brett resumed the conversation where he had broken it off in the train overnight.

"You say you know Hussein-ul-Mulk," he commenced.

"Yes," replied the King's messenger, "and what is more, I have discovered his residence since we parted. It seems that one of the attaches at the Embassy met him recently and thought it advisable to keep in touch with the Young Turkish party, of which Hussein-ul-Mulk is a shining light. So he asked him where he lived, and as the result I have jotted down the address in my note-book." Gaultier searched through his memoranda, and speedily found what he wanted.

"Wait a minute," interrupted Brett. "Does it happen to be No. 11, Rue Barbette?"

The barrister had more than once surprised his companion during the previous night, but this time Gaultier seemed to be more annoyed than startled.

"If you know all these things," he said stiffly, "I don't see why you should bother me to get you the information."

Brett smiled.

"You mean," he said, "that Hussein-ul-Mulk does live at No. 11 Rue Barbette."

"Why, of course he does," was the irritable answer.

"That is very odd," said the barrister. "It was a mere guess on my part, I assure you."

His assurance evidently did not weigh much with Captain Gaultier, who replaced the note-book in his pocket and obviously cast about in his mind for a convenient excuse to take his departure.

Brett knew exactly what was troubling him.

"I am quite in earnest," he said, "in telling you that I simply hazarded a guess at the address. To prove that this is so, I must place you in possession of certain incidents which took place after we parted at the Gare du Nord."

Rapidly but succinctly he told the amazed King's messenger of the chase in the cab across Paris, and how he (Brett) had followed the Frenchman who was tracking Gaultier's movements so closely.

"You will understand," he concluded, "that, in view of my preconceived theory, it was not a very far-fetched assumption to connect Hussein-ul-Mulk with the house in the Rue Barbette into which your spy vanished."

"Well," gasped his astonished hearer, "I must say, Mr. Brett, that I owe you an apology, but I do not see what reason any one can have for shadowing my movements."

"I regard it as mere chance. I imagine that our fellow-passenger in the train caught the name of Hussein-ul-Mulk in our conversation and this decided him to shadow your movements, by means of the confederate who awaited his arrival at the station. As it happened, they simply hit upon the wrong person. It might have paid them much better to follow me. The outcome of the blunder is that I am in a fair way towards ascertaining all I want to know about them, whereas, up to the present, they do not even suspect my existence as an active agent in the affair."

"Well, now, in what way can I help you regarding Hussein-ul-Mulk?"

"Can you introduce me to him?"

"In what capacity?"

Brett reflected for a moment before replying.

"I might pose as a friend of yours interested in Turkish carpets, or coffee, or cigarettes, but for the purpose of my inquiry it would be well to jump preliminaries at once and make this chance acquaintance under the guise of a wire puller."

"All right," said Gaultier. "I don't see that it matters much to me, and the letter you have in your possession from the Under-Secretary is sufficient warrant for me to give you any assistance that lies in my power."

He glanced at his watch. "It is just about time for dejeuner," he continued. "What do you say if we drive to the Rue Barbette at once?"

The barrister assented, and they were soon crossing Paris with the superb disregard for other people's feelings that characterises the local cab-driver.

"By the way," inquired Gaultier, "have you learned anything else since your arrival?"

"Only this—it was not our friend Talbot who came here on Tuesday with a lady."

"You are sure?"

"Positive. I have compared the handwriting in the local register with a letter undoubtedly written by Mr. Talbot, and the two do not agree. The entry of 'Mr. and Mrs. Talbot, London,' in the visitors' book of the Grand Hotel, was a mere trick intended to amuse the police for a few hours until the conspirators had perfected their scheme for final and complete disappearance.

"It was a bold move."

"Very. Quite in keeping with the rest of the details of an uncommon crime."

At last the fiacre stopped in front of the house in the Rue Barbette which Brett had already scrutinized during the early hours of the morning.

"Here we are," said Gaultier with a laugh. "If we find Hussein-ul-Mulk at home I don't know what the deuce we are going to say to him."

"I think I will be able to interest him," said Brett calmly, and without further preliminary Gaultier ascertained from the concierge that the Turkish gentleman was within.

The two men ascended to the second story.

Gaultier rapped loudly on the first door he encountered, and the summons appeared to scatter some of the inhabitants, judging by the rapid opening and closing of doors that preceded the appearance of an elderly and solemn-looking Turk, who cautiously demanded their business.

Gaultier sent in his card, and the servitor locked the door in the faces of the two men while he went to ascertain his mastsr's orders.

"They evidently do not mean to take many risks," said the King's messenger in a low voice.

The door was re-opened, and the elderly Turk ushered them into a spacious room on the right of the entrance hall, where they were received by a young man—a tall, dignified Mohammedan, who rose hastily from a chair, having apparently abandoned the perusal of a newspaper.

"Ah, mon brave Gaultier," he cried, "I am so pleased to see you. I did not know you were in Paris. I have been spending an idle moment over smoke and scandal." He spoke excellent French, and appeared to be quite at his ease, but Brett noticed that Hussein-ul-Mulk held the discarded newspaper upside down. He was smoking a cigarette, lighted the instant before their appearance, and notwithstanding his Oriental phlegm he seemed to be laboring under intense excitement. Nevertheless, Hussein - ul - Mulk could control his nerves.

"Have you had dejeuner, or have you time to join me in a cigarette?" he went on.

"We will be delighted," said Gaultier, taking the proffered case. "The fact is, I only heard of your presence in Paris by accident, and I mentioned the fact to my friend here, who has interested himself in the Armenian cause in London. He at once expressed a keen desire to make your acquaintance, so I ventured to bring him here and introduce him to you. This is Mr. Reginald Brett, an English barrister, and one who keenly sympathizes with the reform movement in Turkey."

"I am delighted to know you, Mr. Brett," said the suave Oriental.

"It is a greater pleasure to me," Brett replied, "to find myself talking to a reformer so distinguished as you. Your name is well known in England. Indeed, in some quarters, it has come to be feared, which in this world is one of the signs of success."

Hussein-ul-Mulk was puzzled, but he remained outwardly unperturbed.

"I was not aware," he purred, "that my poor services to my country were so appreciated by my English friends."

"Ah," said Brett, with a smile that conveyed much, "a man like you cannot long remain hidden. I have good reasons to know that at the present moment your achievements are earnestly attracting the attention of the Foreign Office."

Hussein-ul-Mulk became even more puzzled. Indeed, he exhibited some slight tokens of alarm lest Brett's vehement admiration should reach the ears of others in the adjoining room.

"Really," he said, "you flatter me. Will you not try these cigarettes? They are the best; they are made from tobacco grown especially for the Sultan's household, and it is death to export them. I understand that the cigarette habit has grown very much of recent years in England?"

"Yes," said Brett, "it certainly has developed with amazing rapidity. In trade, as in politics, this is an astounding age."

Gaultier knew that there was more behind the apparent exchange of compliments than appeared on the surface. Having fulfilled his pledge to Brett, he said hurriedly, "Both of you gentlemen will understand that I cannot very well take part in a political discussion. With your permission, Hussein, I will now leave my friend with you for a half-hour's chat, as I have an appointment at the Cafe Riche."

Although Hussein was profoundly disconcerted by Brett's manner no less than his utterances, he could not well refuse to accord him a further audience, so Gaultier quitted the apartment and the Englishman and the Mussulman were left face to face.

Brett felt that the situation demanded a bold game. Under some circumstances he knew that to throw away the scabbard and dash with naked sword into the fray was the right policy.

"I came to see you, Hussein-ul-Mulk," he said, speaking deliberately, "not only because I have an interest in the progressive policy voiced by the Young Turkish party, but on account of matters of personal interest to you, and to friends of mine in England."

The Turk bowed silent recognition of the barrister's motives.

"You are aware," said Brett, "that a large number of valuable diamonds were stolen from the special Envoy of his Majesty the Sultan, in London, last Tuesday night, and that the theft was accompanied by the murder of four of the Sultan's subjects and the abduction of a prominent official in the British Foreign Office?"

For some few seconds Hussein-ul-Mulk strove hard to regain his composure and frame a reply, but Brett, nonchalantly puffing a cloud of smoke into the intervening space, and thus helping his hearer to control his emotions, went on—

"I do not propose wasting time by describing to you the details of a crime with which you are thoroughly acquainted. Let me say, in a sentence, that my chief, perhaps my only, motive in coming here today is to secure the release of my friend Mr. Talbot from the place where he is at present confined, and at the same time to obtain from you a statement which will satisfactorily clear Mr. Talbot in the eyes of his superiors of all personal complicity in the Albert Gate incident." Again there was a breathless silence.

Hussein-ul-Mulk had regained his nerve. He was now considering how best he could dispose of this Englishman who knew so much. To purchase his silence was too hopeless. He must die as speedily and unostentatiously as possible. So he answered not, but thought hard as to ways and means.

Brett, in imminent danger of his life, disregarded all semblance of danger. He leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes in complete enjoyment of Hussein's cigarettes, which were really excellent, and said, in the even, matter-of-fact tones of one who discusses an abstract problem.

"Of course, my dear friend, you are thinking that the best answer you can give me is to strangle me or to shoot me, or adopt some other drastic remedy which finds favor in Constantinople. But let me point out to to you that this will be a serious error of judgment. I have not come here without safeguarding my movements. You are aware that Captain Gaultier, a trusted Foreign Office messenger, brought me here in person. Some members f the British Government, and several important officials of Scotland Yard know that I am in your house and discussing this matter with you. If any accident interferes with my future movements, you will simply precipitate a crisis quite lamentable in its results to yourself, to your association, and to your cause. You will see, therefore, Hussein, that to kill me cannot really be thought of. A man of your penetration and undoubted sagacity must surely admit this at once, and we can then proceed to discuss matters in a friendly and pleasant manner."

(To be continued.)

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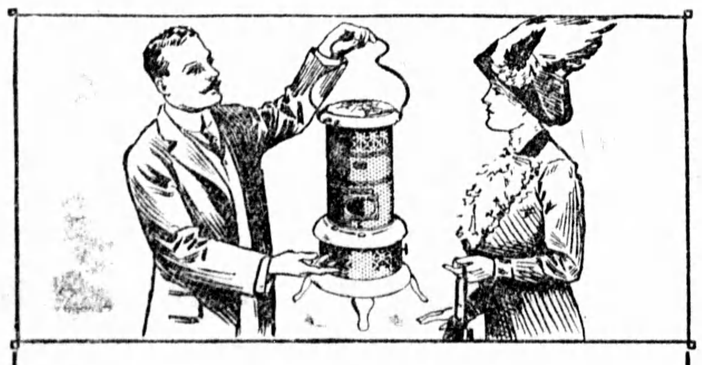

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