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CLOSE QUARTERS;

OR, THE HOUSE IN THE RUE BARBETTE

CHAPTER VIII.—(Cont'd)

To his acute brain there came an immediate confirmation of his theory. Evidently the diamonds had not been previously in the Turk's possession. The little Frenchman had just delivered them, and this in itself was a strange circumstance in view of the fact that the genuine stones must have been in Paris at least three days.

Brett concentrated all his dramatic faculties in look, voice, and gesture.

"You fools!" he cried. "You have been swindled by a device which a child might suspect. These are not the Sultan's diamonds. These are frauds—cleverly concocted bits of crystal and alum—intended to keep you happy until you return to Constantinople and discover how thoroughly you were deceived."

"You lie!" roared the little Frenchman. "They are genuine."

Brett wanted to punch the diminutive scoundrel heavily in the face, but he restrained himself. Turning with a magnificent assumption of courteousness to Hussein-ul-Mulk, he said—

"Come, I told you you were acting childishly: this proves it. A most outrageous attempt has been made to swindle you, if I may use such a term to persons who confessedly are plotting to rob another. Surely this will convince you that you have nothing to fear from me. I am here as the agent neither of the Sultan nor the police. It is a simple matter for you to verify my statement. All that is necessary is for one of your [illegible] to take any of these alleged diamonds—I would suggest the smallest one, so as not to create suspicion—to any jeweller in the district, and he will test it for you immediately, thus proving the truth of my statement. Look here; I will convince you myself."

He took the monster diamond irreverently in his hand before Hussein-ul-Mulk could prevent him and turned to the window. He pressed the stone against the glass and tried to make it cut. It failed. He placed it against his cheek. It was warm. A pure diamond would be icy cold. More than this, a small portion of the composition of which the imitation had been hastily concocted, broke off in his fingers.

"You see," he laughed. "Do you require further proof?"

Even while he spoke the diminutive little Frenchman turned and bolted. One of the Turks drew a revolver and rushed after him, but Hussein-ul-Mulk uttered some authoritative words which prevented the man from firing. The Frenchman was evidently an adapt in the art of dodging pursuit. In the passage he ducked suddenly and threw the Turk heavily to the ground. Then, without further interference he slipped the latch of the door and slammed it hastily behind him, leaving Brett silently laughing at Hussein-ul-Mulk.

"Can it be possible that what you say is true?" said Hussein-ul-Mulk, in such piteous accents that Brett was moved to further mirth.

"Surely you do not doubt the evidence?" he said. Take any of these stones; they will crumble to pieces on the hearth if struck the slightest blow. See, I will pulverize one with my heel."

And he did so, though the amazed and despairing men whom he addressed would have restrained him, for they still could not bring themselves to believe.

Hussein-ul-Mulk was the first to recover his scattered senses.

"We can not choose but believe you, Mr. Brett," he said. "We are even indebted to you for making this disastrous discovery at such an early date. We paid our agents so highly that we thought their honesty was assured. We find we are mistaken, and consequently we apologize to you for using threats which were unnecessary. We rely on your honor not to incriminate us with the police. All we can tell you is that your friend is not dead, but we do not know his whereabouts."

"Nonsense," cried Brett angrily. "Why do you seek to mislead me in this fashion?"

"Sir," said the Turk, "I am telling you the truth. We believe that Mr. Talbot is a prisoner in London, but we do not know in what locality. My friends here and myself, as you have already surmised, are merely members of a political organization. It was necessary for us to secure possession of the Imperial diamond and its companions. We spared no expense, nor hesitated at any means that would accomplish our purpose. We have been foiled for the moment. I can tell you nothing else, and I advise you to leave us and forget that such persons exist, for I swear to you by the beard of the Prophet that had events turned out differently you would now be a lifeless corpse in this room, whilst your body would not be discovered for many weeks, as we intended to leave Paris this afternoon as soon as the diamonds came into our possession."

At this moment a thunderous knocking reverberated through the house.

The Turks gazed at each other in affright. None of them moved to open the door. But the knock was not repeated, for the door itself was thrown bodily from its hinges, and the stalwart form of Lord Fairholme accompanied by two policemen, appeared in the passage.

"Ah," cried Brett, intervening with ready tact, "I had forgotten you, Fairholme. I see you kept your appointment. These are not required," he rattled on pleasantly, turning towards the stern-looking sergents de ville; "I am quite alive and uninjured. My friends here and myself had a few earnest words, but we have settled matters satisfactorily."

The suspicious policemen glanced from the smiling Englishman to the perturbed Turks. At the first sound of danger Hussein-ul-Mulk had closed the case in which lay the spurious diamonds, so these pretentious-looking gems did not excite the curiosity of the men of law.

The senior officer demanded from Lord Fairholme an explanation of the exciting statements which induced them to accompany him, but Brett stepped into the breach.

"It is quite true," he said, "that my friend was anxious on my account. It was even possible these Turkish gentlemen here and myself might have proceeded to extremities, but the affair has ended satisfactorily, and if you will allow me——" He put his hand into his pocket and a slight monetary transaction terminated the incident pleasantly for all parties.

Soon Brett and Fairholme found themselves in the street, and again did the barrister draw in deep and invigorating draughts of Paris air.

"Where now?" said Fairholme.

"Tell me," cried Brett eagerly, "did you notice in which direction the little man who left No. 11 about ten minutes ago?"

"Better than that, I heard where he was going to. He was in such a fiendish funk that he paid heed to nobody but flung himself into a passing cab and yelled, 'Take me to the Cabaret Noir, Boulevard Montmartre.'"

"Good. You are a splendid detective. You have saved me hours of search and perhaps days of failure. Come; let us, too, go to the Cabaret Noir."

CHAPTER IX.

The exterior of the Cabaret Noir belied its name.

Originally, no doubt, it was one of the vilest dens in a vile locality, but the fairy hand of the brewer had touched the familiar wineshop, and it glistened to-day in much mahogany, more brass, and a dazzling collection of mirrors.

"Here we are," said his lordship cheerfully. "Let's take them by surprise and run over the whole show before any one can stop us."

"No," said Brett; this is Paris, and the police here has ways more mysterious than those of Scotland Yard. We will gain nothing by drastic measures. Indeed, had I known the sort of place we were coming to I would have visited it to-night and in disguise. As it is, we have been seen already by any one interested in our movements, and it would be useless to adopt any pretence, so follow me.

He boldly entered through the main door, and found himself in a light, airy room, filled, in three-fourths of its area, with little marble-topped tables surrounded by diminutive chairs, whilst a bar counter was partitioned off in a corner.

The attendant in charge was a dreary-eyed waiter, who seemed to think that the presence of a couple of sight-seeing Englishmen at such an hour was another testimony to the lunatic propensities of the Anglo-Saxon race.

"This is the Cabaret Noir?" questioned Brett.

"But yes, monsieur."

"A gentleman, a friend of mine, came here a few minutes ago in a fiacre. He was small, slight, so high"—illustrating the stature by his hand. "He was dressed in dark blue clothes with shiny boots. He was—"

Brett's eager description was cut short by the appearance of a new character. Through a narrow door leading into the bar came a handsome dark-eyed woman, aged perhaps twenty-five, well dressed, shapely, and carrying herself with the easy grace of a born Parisienne.

Her hair was jet black. Her large dark eyes were recessed beneath arched and strongly pencilled eyebrows. Her skin had that peculiar tint of porcelain white so often seen in women of southern blood.

Yet there was nothing delicate in this lady's appearance or manner. A rich color suffused her cheeks, and her language was remarkably free both in volume and style.

Her manner changed somewhat as she addressed herself to Brett and his companion. There was sufficient of the landlady in her demeanour when she said, "And what would messieurs be pleased to command?"

Now, if there was one type of femininity more than another which Brett thoroughly understood it was the saucy, quick-witted, handsome adventuress. He knew that the woman scrutinizing him so coolly came well within this category.

He could not tell, of course, in what way she might be associated with the gang whose proceedings contained the explanation of Talbot's fate, but he instantly resolved to adopt a determined position with the lady who half-petulantly, half-curiously, was awaiting his reply.

He came nearer to her.

"I am glad," he said, "that I have met you."

The woman looked him boldly in the eyes. "Was it for the happiness of seeing me that monsieur has visited the house?"

"That might well serve as the reason, but the pleasure is all the greater since it was unexpected."

"You are pleased to be facetious," she replied. "Will you not tell me your business? I have affairs to occupy me."

"Assuredly. I have driven here as quickly as possible from No. 11, Rue Barbette."

This attack, so direct and uncompromising, did not fail to have its effect. A ready mask of suspicion fell across the woman's impudent, pretty face.

There was just a tinge of stage laughter in her tone when she cried: "Really, how interesting! And where in the Rue Barbette, monsieur? In what way am I concerned with—No. 11, did you say?"

Brett well knew how to conduct the attack upon this lady. His voice fell to a determined note, his eyes looked gravely into hers as he answered—"It is useless to pretend that you do not understand me. You are losing moments worth gold, perhaps diamonds! Within a few minutes the police will be here, and then it will be too late. Help me first and I will let the police take care of themselves. Refuse me your assistance, and I will leave you and your friends to the mercy of the district commissaire."

A dangerous light leaped into the woman's eyes at this direct challenge.

"Monsieur is pleased to speak in riddles," she said. "This is a restaurant. We can execute your orders, but we are not skilled in acting charades. You will find better performers in the booths out there;" and she swept her hands scornfully towards the boulevard, with its medley of tents, stalls, and merry-go-rounds.

(To be continued.)

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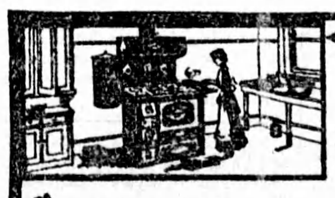

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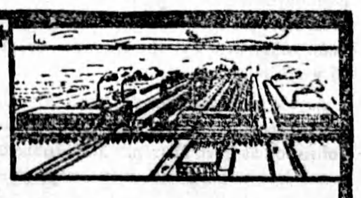

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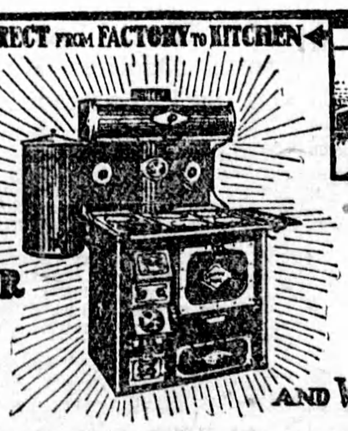

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