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CLOSE QUARTERS;

OR, THE HOUSE IN THE RUE BARBETTE

CHAPTER IX.—(Cont'd)

Brett smiled. "You are a stupid woman," he said. "You think you are serving your friends by adopting this tone. In affect you are bringing them to the guillotine. Now listen. If I leave you without our further words you do not see me again. You will know nothing of what is going on until the police have lodged you in a cell. Neither you nor your associates can escape. I promise nothing, but perhaps if you tell me what I want to know there may be a chance for you. Otherwise there is none. Shall I go?"

And he turned as if to approach the door.

For an instant the woman hesitated, and Brett thought that he had scored.

"Wait," she said, lowering her voice, though there was still the menace of subdued passion in her accents. "Who is your friend?"

"A gentleman whose identity in no way concerns you. You must deal with me, and it will be better if you ask who I am."

"I know," she said, laconically. "Come this way, both of you."

She raised a flap-door located at one side of the counter. Brett followed her into a passage behind the doorway that led into the bar. Fairholme succeeded him.

The trio passed rapidly through the door at the end of the passage, and quickly found themselves in a long, low room, usually devoted to billiards. The place was dark and smelled evilly of stale tobacco. Daylight penetrated but feebly through the red blinds that blocked up three windows on one side. The woman drew two of these blinds, and thus illuminated the interior. The windows opened onto a yard, and the place was thoroughly shut off from all observation from the street.

"Now," she said, "I will show you something."

She walked toward the fire-place at the end of the room. On the mantlepiece was a square of iron sheeting, painted white and studded with curious-looking spikes in circles, triangles, and straight lines. From a box at hand she took half a dozen small glass bulbs, red and blue. She placed them in a line on some of the spikes at intervals of two inches. Then she retired to that side of the room where they had entered. The distance of perhaps thirty feet.

Before Brett or Fairholme could vaguely guess her intention she whipped a revolver out of her pocket. It would be idle to deny that they were startled, but the woman paid not the least attention to them.

She steadily leveled the weapon and fired twice, smashing the two outer balls of the six. Then she transferred the pistol to her left hand and smashed another pair. Then she turned her back to the target, adjusting a small mirror attached to the butt of the revolver, and smashed both of the remaining bulbs by firing over her left shoulder. Sweeping round with a triumphant smile towards the barrister, she said, "I can do that in fifty other ways, but six will suffice."

"It is very clever, madame," he said. "May I ask why I am indebted to you for this display?"

She placed the revolver in her pocket. "It is my answer to your question, monsieur," she said. "That is the way I and my friends often talk to people who annoy us; and now I shall wish you good-day. You will find other sights in Montmartre to interest you."

Brett laughed easily, and bowed low.

"Believe me," he said. "I will find few performers so expert and, may I add, so discreet. We will meet again, and perhaps test your skill."

Without another word the party returned to the front room of the restaurant, and Brett and Fairholme passed into the street, where their cab was waiting.

"I suppose she meant," said Fairholme "that if we were not jolly careful she would put a bullet through our hearts as easily as through those glass bulbs."

"Such was her intention," said Brett, dryly. "But women never have a true dramatic genius. That was a piece of melodrama which might suffice with many of her class. It amused me, but it was a waste of time on her part."

"Anyhow, we shall not get much out of her in the way of information."

"Oh, yes, we will. She will tell us everything. She has told me a great deal already."

He directed the driver to wait for them at a street corner some little distance farther on. Close to where they stood an itinerant vendor was selling some mechanical toys.

Brett bought one. The price was twenty sous. He gave the man a two-franc piece and refused the change.

"Do you know," he said, "who is the proprietor of the Cabaret Noir?"

"Certainly, monsieur," replied the gutter-merchant; "it is Gros Jean. His name is Beaucaire."

"Ah! And the lady who lives there, a dark pretty woman with white skin, who is she?"

"That is his daughter," said the man. "She is known as La Belle Chasseuse." "Why such a name?"

"Because she is clever with firearms. She used to be in a circus, but she left the profession a year ago."

"And does she live here constantly?"

"I cannot say, I think she goes away a great deal. She was travelling recently; she came back—let me see—last Tuesday night."

"Thank you," said Brett. The two re-entered their cab, and Brett told the driver to proceed as rapidly as possible to the Rue St. Honore.

"I hope to goodness," he said to Fairholme, "that Captain Gaultier has not left Paris already; these Foreign Office Messengers are liable to be despatched to the other end of the earth at a moment's notice."

"Why do you wish to see him?" said Fairholme.

"Simply to obtain definite confirmation of my theory. La Belle Chasseuse was the woman who accompanied the man made up to look like Jack Talbot during his journey from London. If Gaultier can see her and assure me that I am right I will be convinced concerning that which I already know to be true."

"By Jove!" cried Fairholme, "that never occurred to me. I wonder if it is so?"

"Mademoiselle Beaucaire is quite an adept in two things: she can break tiny glass bulbs and she can flirt. She chose to exhibit the first of these accomplishments to us, and convey what was intended to be a warning; in reality, she gave us some valuable information."

"I suppose," said Fairholme, "that this crowd will watch us pretty closely, won't they?"

Brett leaned back in the cab and laughed heartily.

"We are the most interesting persons in Paris to them at this moment," he said. "That poor fellow who sold us the toys will have to change his position, I am afraid. One of them is following us now. Let's see who it is."

At the next street corner he stopped the cab suddenly, and jumped out, followed by Fairholme. A minute later another vehicle dashed into the street. In it was seated a lady, closely veiled; but a large feather hat and a grotesque pattern of a black veil could not wholly conceal the pretty, determined face of La Belle Chasseuse.

Evidently she had no one at hand to undertake the mission, so she followed Brett in person. He signalled to her and her driver. Astonished, the man pulled up. Brett instantly advanced and took off his hat with that pleasant smile of his which usually went straight to the female heart, but which now thoroughly lost its effect on the furious young woman who looked at him from the interior of the voiture.

"Allow me," he said, "to offer my friendly services. It is a close day, and mademoiselle has, I am sure, many other calls on her time. I will save you at least an hour, and myself nearly the same period. I am going to secure the presence of a witness to identify you as the lady who crossed the Channel last Tuesday in company with a gentleman. You both drove to the Grand Hotel, and your companion signed the register there in the names of Mr. and Mrs. Talbot; is it not so?"

She bent forward and looked at him viciously. Her eyes sparkled with annoyance at being caught so easily in her self-imposed piece of espionage.

"Monsieur is clever," she snapped.

"Thank you," he replied, still smiling. "I can occasionally hit the mark with a guess as well as mademoiselle can with her pistol. But, believe me, I only intend at this moment to be polite. Of course, the presence of a witness to identify you is unnecessary. Mademoiselle can now return to the Cabaret Noir, whilst my friend and I will proceed direct to the Grand Hotel. It saves so much trouble, does it not?"

For a moment the woman looked as though she would have liked to produce that infallible revolver and shoot him on the spot. Then she angrily commanded her driver to return.

Fairholme surveyed the scene with open-eyed amazement. "Well," he said, "that beats everything. You really have a splendid nerve. The whole business reads like a chapter out of one of Gaboriau's novels."

"That is the way people live in Paris, my dear fellow. Life is an artificial matter here. But all this excitement has made me hungry. Let us have dejeuner."

CHAPTER X.

On their way to the hotel, Brett, yielding apparently to a momentary impulse, stopped the cab at a house in the Rue due Chaussee d'Antin. Without any explanation to Lord Fairholme he disappeared into the interior, and did not rejoin his companion for nearly ten minutes.

"It is perhaps not of much use," he explained on his return, "but I do not like to leave any stone unturned. The man I have just called on is a well-known private detective, and I can trust him to look after my business without taking the police into his confidence. Two of his smartest agents will maintain a close watch on both the Cabaret Noir and No. 11, Rue Barbette, during the afternoon. We are tracking some of the most expert and daring criminals in France. It is hopeless to expect them to provide us with clues; they simply won't do it. No one but a genius in criminality would have risked such a dramatic move as the personation of Jack Talbot, or dared to put in an open appearance at the Grand Hotel. So my agents here can only hope, at the best, to get sight of any messenger or assistant scoundrel who may turn up at either of the places indicated."

It was evident that whilst he rattled on in a careless strain his active brain was busily employed in discounting the future.

(To be continued.)

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"I am a literary man whose nervous energy is a great part of my stock in trade, and ordinarily I have little patience with breakfast foods and the extravagant claims made of them. But I cannot withhold my acknowledgment of the debt that I owe to Grape-Nuts food.

"I discovered long ago that the very bulkiness of the ordinary diet was not calculated to give one a clear head, the power of sustained, accurate thinking. I always felt heavy and sluggish in mind as well as body after eating the ordinary meal, which diverted the blood from the brain to the digestive apparatus.

"I tried foods easy of digestion, but found them usually deficient in nutriment. I experimented with many breakfast foods and they, too, proved unsatisfactory, till I reached Grape-Nuts. And then the problem was solved.

"Grape-Nuts agreed with me perfectly from the beginning, satisfying my hunger and supplying the nutriment that so many other prepared foods lack.

"I had not been using it very long before I found that I was turning out an unusual quantity and quality of work. Continued use has demonstrated to my entire satisfaction that Grape-Nuts food contains the elements needed by the brain and nervous system of the hard working public writer." Name given by Postum Co., Battle Creek, Mich.

"There's a reason," and it is explained in the little book, "The Road to Wellville," in pkgs.

Ever read the above letter? A new one appears from time to time. They are genuine, true and full of human interest.

Do you happen to know of anything more industrious than an idle rumor?

CALENDAR REFORM IN CHINA

Its Year to be That of Western Nations.

From Pekin it is announced that the Chinese Government is about to drop the troublesome moon from its calendar and follow the practice of western nations in using only the sun. The present Chinese year began on January 30, and is the year 48 of the seventy-sixth cycle, a cycle consisting of sixty years, and the first year of the first cycle occurring B.C. 2637. But owing to the use of the moon the number of days in the year varies considerably. Ordinarily there are twelve lunations or months, but once in thirty lunations a thirteenth lunation is added to the year, as a result of which the year can be as short as 354 days or as long as 384 days. The months are more regular than our own, alternating between twenty-nine and thirty days. The Chinese year completely fails to keep the seasons within proper bounds.—Westminster Gazette.

EUROPEANS TOO SALT.

A Swedish scientific expedition which for many months past has been making a study of the aborigines in the back blocks of Australia, has found cannibals there of a distinctly Semitic cast of countenance. They do not care for the flesh of Europeans, however, declaring that it is "too salt."

A POSSIBLE REASON.

"I wonder how Adam and Eve came to name their eldest son Cain," said Wattles.

"They probably knew what they were raising," said Dingbats.

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A woman often does not notice what a cold day it is so long as she is bustling around the house. But when she sits down to her sewing and mending, she soon feels chilly.

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Wooden drinking troughs are about as reliable as the weather.

They are short-lived and require replacing every few years—not to mention continual patching to keep them in repair.

The best of wood cannot withstand, for long, constant dampness and soaking. Its tendency to rapid decay soon shows itself in leaks and stagnant pools of water around trough.

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The dampness which destroys lumber only intensifies the strength and hardness of Concrete.

You can impair a wooden trough with comparatively little use; but it takes a powerful explosive to put a Concrete water tank out of business.

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is your choice—expense-producing Wood, or money-saving Concrete?

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