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CLOSE QUARTERS;

OR, THE HOUSE IN THE RUE BARBETTE

CHAPTER X.—(Cont'd)

La Belle Chasseuse was evidently in a hurry. She sped along at a surprising pace, until she reached a crossing where the rows of stalls and booths were temporarily suspended. At one corner stood a cab, and towards this vehicle she directed her steps. Before Brett quite realized what was happening, the door of the cab opened, mademoiselle jumped inside, and, as if he were waiting for her appearance, the driver whipped up his horse and drove off at a furious pace.

At that instant a small victoria with a sturdy pony in the shafts, which had just deposited a lively fare in the vicinity of the Moulin Rouge, drove along the street.

Brett sprang into it and said eagerly to the driver—

"Keep that cab in sight! I will pay you double fare!"

The man tightened his reins and raised his whip in prompt obedience to the order, when suddenly two men jumped into the vehicle from opposite sides, seized Brett and forced him down on to the seat, while one of them said to the astonished cabby—

"Take us at once to the Central Perfecture of Police."

The man recognized that these newcomers were not to be trifled with. Without a word or a question he rattled his horse across the stone pavement, and then Brett choking with rage at this interference at a supreme moment, realized that for some extraordinary reason he was a prisoner, and in the hands of a couple of detectives.

By this time the cab containing the lady had vanished, but the barrister made one despairing effort.

"For Heaven's sake," he said to his captors, "take me where you will, but first follow that cab and ascertain its destination."

"What cab?" demanded one of his guards sarcastically.

"The cab which I wished our driver to overtake at the moment when you pounced on me."

"This is a mere trick," broke in the other. "Don't bother about his cab. We have got him safe enough, and let the commissaire deal with him now."

"Listen to me," cried Brett. "You are making a frightful mistake. Your action at this moment may cause irretrievable delay and loss. If you will only do as I tell you—"

"Shut up," growled the first man, "or it will be worse for you. Your best plan is to keep a quiet tongue in your head."

It was not often that Brett lost his temper, but most certainly he lost it on this occasion. He was endowed with no small share of physical strength, and for an instant the wild notion came into his head that he might perhaps succeed in throwing the two dettctives into the roadway and then overpower the driver, taking charge of the vehicle himself and trusting to luck again to catch sight of the vanished lady and her companion, who, he doubted not, had awaited her arrival at the quiet corner where she joined him.

Unconsciously he must have given some premonition of this desperate scheme, for the two policemen tightened their grasp, forced his hands higher up his back, and bent his head forward until he was in danger of having either his neck or his shoulders dislocated.

"Will you keep quiet?" murmured the chief detective. "You cannot escape, and you are only making the affair more disastrous to yourself."

Then Brett realized that further resistance was hopeless. He managed to gurgle out that if they would allow him to assume a more comfortable attitude he would not trouble them any further.

Gingerly and cautiously the two men somewhat relaxed the strain, and he was able to breathe freely once more.

Then he laughed, but he could not help saying in English——

"The shadow of Scotland Yard falls on me even here. Porr old Winter, how I will roast him over this adventure!"

"What are you talking about?" demanded one of the men.

"I was only thinking aloud," replied Brett.

"And what were your thoughts?"

"Simply this, that the sooner I meet your remarkable astute commissary the better I shall be pleased."

CHAPTER XI.

The journey across Paris proceeded without further incident, until they reached the prefecture.

The two detectives hurried their prisoner into a large general office, where he was surveyed with some curiosity by the subordinates lounging near a huge fire, whilst one of their number reported his arrival. After a brief interval he was taken into an inner office. Behind a green baize-covered table was seated a sharp-looking man, whose face was chiefly composed of eyebrows, pince-nez, a hooked nose, and a furious imperiale.

"Your name?" he said sharply.

"Reginald Brett," was the reply.

The Frenchman required this to be spelt for him.

"Nationality?"

"English."

"Profession?"

"Barrister-at-law."

The official consulted a type-written document, which he selected from a mass of papers fastened by an India rubber band. Then he looked curiously at the prisoner.

"Are you sure this is the man?" he said to the senior detective.

"Quite positive, monsieur."

"Then take off his wig and get a towel, so that he may remove some of his make-up. The rascal should be an actor. I never saw a better disguise in my life."

Brett knew it was hopeless to attempt explanations at this stage. He readily fell in with their directions, and in a few seconds he stood revealed in something akin to his ordinary appearance.

Now, the French Commissary of Police was no fool. He was an adept at reading character, but he was certainly puzzled after a sharp scrutiny of Brett's clear-cut, intelligent features. Nevertheless, he knew that the criminal instinct is often allied with the most deceptive external appearances. So he turned to the detective, and said—

"Tell me, brifly, what happened?"

"In accordance with instructions, monsieur," the man replied. "Philippe and I ascertained the movements of the prisoner at the Grand Hotel. During the afternoon he received messages from London and from some persons in Paris, which documents are now probably in his possession. He quitted the hotel at eight o'clock, disguised as you have seen. He called for a moment at a house in the Rue du Chaussee d'Antin, the number of which we noted, and then made his way to the Cafe Noir in Montmartre. There we watched him from the door for nearly three hours. He feigned drunkenness, but held communication with no person."

"Ha!" cried the commissary. This struck him as an important point. He made a memorandum of it.

"Soon after eleven o'clock he rose hastily and quitted the cafe, crossed the Boulevard, and hailed a cab. We would have followed him, but there was no other vehicle in sight. As our instructions were to arrest him at any moment he seemed likely to elude us, we seized him. He struggled violently, and told us some story about his desire to follow another cab, which he said had disappeared. We saw no cab such as he described, and we treated his words as a mere device to abstract attention. We were right. A moment later he made an attempt to escape, and we were compelled to use considerable force to prevent him from being successful."

The commissary turned his eyes to the prisoner and was seemingly about to question him, when Brett said with a smile—

"Perhaps, monsieur, you will allow me to say a word or two."

"Certainly." The official knew that criminals generally implicated themselves when they commenced explaining matters.

"You are acting, I presume," said the barrister, "in obedience to reports received from London police with reference to the murder of four Turkish subjects at Albert Gate, and the theft of some valuable diamonds belonging to the Sultan?"

This calm summary of the facts seemed to disconcert the Frenchman. It astonished him considerably to find his prisoner thus indicating so clearly the nature of the charge to be brought against him.

"That may be so," he admitted.

"It is so," went on Brett; "and in this matter you are even more hopelessly idiotic than I took you to be. I have told you my name and profession. I am a friend of Mr. Talbot, the English gentleman who has been spirited away in connection with this crime, and I have in my pocket at this moment a letter from the British Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, authorizing me to use my best efforts towards elucidating the mystery and tracking the real criminals. Here is the letter," he continued, producing a document and laying it before the amazed official. Further, an inquiry made at the Grand Hotel will produce unquestionable testimony from the manager, who knows me, and from my friend, Lord Fairholme, who occupies rooms there at this moment."

"Lord Fairholme!" stuttered the official. "Why, that is the name given by the other prisoner."

"Do you mean to say you have arrested the Earl of Fairholme?" gasped Brett, struggling with an irresistible desire to laugh.

The Frenchman covered his confusion by growling an unintelligible order, and bent over the letter which Brett had given to him. In half a minute one of the detectives returned, and with him was Fairholme, on whose honest face indignation and astonishment struggled for mastery.

"Oh, surely that cannot be you, Brett!" cried his lordship, the moment he entered the room. "Well, of all the —— fools that ever lived, these French Johnnies take the cake. I suppose that they have spoiled the whole business! If the brutes had not taken me by surprise I would have knocked over a dozen of them before they arrested me."

"Silence!" shrieked the commissary, into whose mind was intruding the consciousness that he had committed an outrageous blunder.

"What did you say your name was?" he demanded fiercely.

"I told you my name an hour ago," said his lordship haughtily, "and if you had not been so beastly clever you would have believed me. I am the Earl of Fairholme, a fact that can be readily substantiated by dozens of people here in Paris, and this is Mr. Reginald Brett, a friend of mine, who would have probably discovered the mystery of my friend's disappearance and the whereabouts of those diamonds by this time if you had not interfered."

His lordship was hardly coherent, with annoyance, but the acute official had now convinced himself that a stupid mistake had been committed by his department.

He became apologetic and suave. He explained that their mysterious proceedings had to some extent committed them in the eyes of the police to secret knowledge of the crime which had so thoroughly aroused the detective departments in both London and Paris.

Evidently Scotland Yard had not advised the French police of Mr. Brett's official connection with the hunt for the murderers. The agents of the Paris Bureau had watched Brett's comings and goings during the day, and the detectives' suspicions, once aroused were intensified when his friend, Lord Fairholme, sought the aid of two uniformed policemen to break in the door of the Turkish residents in the Rue Barbette.

Even now, politely concluded the commissary, he would regretfully be compelled to detain them for a little while, until he verified their statements. Meanwhile they would not be subject to any further indignities, and might procure such refreshments as they desired. They would probably be set at liberty within a couple of hours.

(To be continued.)

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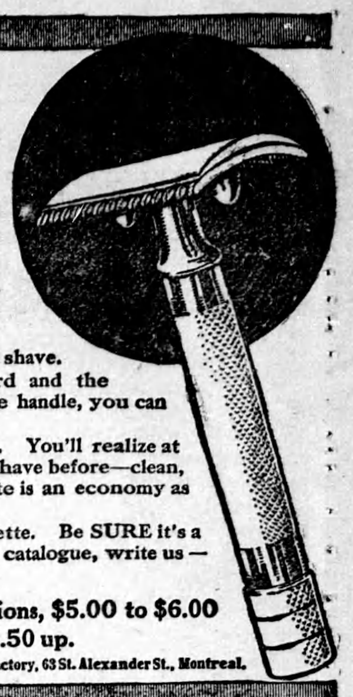

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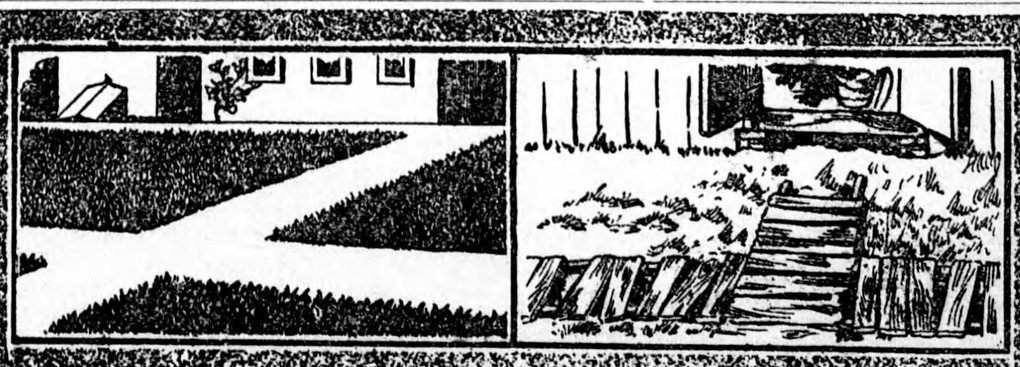

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