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CLOSE QUARTERS;

OR, THE HOUSE IN THE RUE BARBETTE

CHAPTER XIV.—(Cont'd)

Having acquainted the police officer with the exact position of the hidden apartment, he ended by saying—

"Continue inquiries throughout Paris during the whole of to-morrow. Do not visit the Cabaret Noir for the purpose of police inspection until a late hour—long after midnight—when the cafe is empty and the Boulevard comparatively deserted. It is only a mere guess on my part. The Turks may not be there. If they are, they should be set at liberty and not questioned. Tell them they owe their escape to me. If you do not find them you may make other discoveries of general interest to the police. But above all things, I do not wish you to interfere with Gros Jean or his house until the next twenty-four hours have elapsed."

The commissary assured him that his desires would be respected, and soon afterwards Brett went upstairs with the full determination to secure a long night's sleep, of which he stood much in need.

He had reached the sitting room reserved for the use of the party when Talbot and Lord Fairholme burst in excitedly.

"We have seen her!" gasped the earl.

"Seen whom?" demanded the barrister.

"Mademoiselle Beaucaire," cried Talbot; "the woman who accompanied Dubois in his flight from London. I recognized her instantly. I could pick her out among a million as the same person who so coolly made up Dubois to represent me, whilst I was lying tied on the bed in that flat."

In their eagerness the two men had forgotten to close the door. Brett ran to it, and looked out into the passage to learn if their words had perchance been overheard. No one was in sight. He closed the door behind him when he re-entered, and said quietly—

"How did you happen to meet her?"

"Whilst you were wrestling with the telephone," said Fairholme, "Edith and Jack and I went to the door of the hotel to have a look at the people passing in the Canhablere. None of us have ever been in Marseilles before, you know. We were gazing at the crowd, when suddenly Jack gripped my arm and said: 'There she is! Look at that woman, quick!' He pointed to a tall, well-dressed female, wrapped up in a fur cloak, and wearing a large feather hat. Luckily her veil was up, and the electric light fell fully on her as she passed. She was undoubtedly La Belle Chasseuse, and I bet you anything you like she had just come away from the music-hall where she is performing."

"Did she see you?" demanded Brett excitedly.

"Not a bit; she was gazing at the passing tram-cars, and evidently on the look out for some particular line."

"What happened next?" demanded the barrister. "Where is Miss Talbot?"

"Edith has gone after her," said Fairholme.

"What!" cried Brett, more startled than he cared to own.

"Yes," broke in Talbot eagerly. "She heard my words and instantly decided to follow her. She said that the woman knew both of us, and might easily detect us, but she, Edith, was unknown to her, and would never be suspected. She simply forced us to come and tell you, and then darted off like a greyhound before we could stop her."

Brett forced himself to say calmly—

"Miss Talbot has acted quite rightly. We must simply remain here until she returns. There is not the slightest ground for alarm. A woman who could act with such ready judgment is well able to take care of herself. Unless I am much mistaken, we shall see her within the hour."

It was well for the peace of mind of the younger men that Sir Hubert Fitzjames had gone to his room soon after the party reached the hotel. Had the irascible baronet known of his niece's mission, no power on earth could have restrained him from setting every policeman in Marseilles on her track forthwith.

And so they kept their vigil, striving to talk unconcernedly, but watching the clock with feverish impatience until Edith should return.

CHAPTER XV.

In the suburbs Marseilles is modern enough, but the chief thoroughfare, known to all who read, the famous and ever busy Cannebiere, plunges rapidly downhill until it empties itself on the crowded quays that surround the old port.

With the newer Marseilles of the Joliette—well found in wharfs and warehouses, steam cranes and railway lines—the town beloved of the Phoenicians has no concern. There is no touch of modern ugliness in the tiny maritime refuge, which is barely half the size of the Serpentine. Lofty, old-fashioned, half-ruined houses throng close to its rugged quays.

At night this quarter of the turbulent city wears an air of intense mystery. The side streets are narrow and tortuous. Dark courts and alleys twist in every conceivable direction, while the brightness of the many wine shops facing each other across the tideless harbor only serves to enhance the squalid gloom that forms the most marked characteristic of the buildings clustered behind them.

Edith Talbot, intent on the pursuit of a woman so dramatically bound up with the mystery affecting her brother, paid heed to no consideration save the paramount one, that the hurrying figure in front must be kept in sight.

Contrary to the opinions expressed by the two men, Mdlle. Beaucaire did not board a passing tram-car. To Edith's eyes she seemed to be eagerly watching for some person who might pass in one of the small open carriages which in Marseilles take the place of the London hansom. Even as she rapidly walked down the crowded street mademoiselle closely scrutinized each vehicle that overtook her, and once, at a busy crossing, she deliberately stopped. Edith, of course, slackened her pace, and simultaneously became aware how incongruous was her appearance at such an hour in such a thoroughfare.

Much taller than the average Frenchwoman, neatly dressed in an English tailor-made costume, with her smart straw hat and well-gloved hands, Miss Talbot naturally attracted the curious gaze of the passersby.

Instantly it occurred to her that some disguise was absolutely necessary if she would not court an attention fatal to her enterprise. It chanced that where she stood for a moment a fruit-seller occupied a tiny shop squeezed tightly between a church and a restaurant. The interior was dark enough, for a couple of flaring naptha lamps were so disposed as to cast their flickering brilliancy over the baskets of fruit and vegetables displayed in the window or crowded together on the pavement.

The woman inside had a kindly and contented face, cherry ripe in cheek and lips, and from a pair of deep-set blue eyes she looked out quizzically at the hurrying crowd.

Assuring herself with one fleeting glance that La Belle Chasseuse still remained motionless and intent at the crossing, Edith darted into the shop. She produced a sovereign.

"I have not much French money," she said hurriedly, "but this is worthy twenty-five francs. Can you let me have a large dark shawl? I do not care whether or not it is old or worn. It is necessary that I should remain out for some few minutes longer, and I do not wish to court observation."

Even as she spoke she removed her straw hat and eagerly tore off her gloves. The Frenchwoman saw that one of her own sex, English, and consequently mad, desired to screen her appearance from too inquisitive eyes.

It was sufficient for her that there should be a spice of romance in the request. With one hand she pocketed the sovereign; with the other she dived into a recess beneath the counter and produced the very article Edith wanted.

"But certainly, mademoiselle," she cried. "See. It will cover you to the waist."

Edith advanced another pace into the darkest corner of the shop, quickly arranged the shawl over her head and shoulders, and hastily murmuring her thanks, rushed forth into the street again, leaving hat and gloves behind in her haste.

She was just in time to see Mdlle. Beaucaire either abandon her search or resolve it in some manner, for the lady once more resumed progress towards the old harbor, in whose placid bosom could be seen the reflections of numberless lights from the small promontory beyond, crowned with the Fort St. Nicholas and the Chateau du Phare.

Looking neither right nor left but hastening onwards with rapid strides, mademoiselle crossed the rough pavement of the Quai de la Fraternite, bearing away diagonally towards the left.

But if the Frenchwoman was a good walker, Edith Talbot was a better one, and now that she no longer feared notice—for she draped the large shawl as elegantly about her shoulders as any woman in Marseilles—she decided to adopt a little strategy. Instead of keeping directly behind mademoiselle, she broke into a run under the shadow of the houses. By thus making up ground she approached the narrow street towards which the Frenchwoman was heading almost simultaneously with her quarry, but apparently from an opposite direction. The aspect of the thoroughfare through which the two women sped was forbidding in the extreme. The houses were many storeys in height, of disreputable appearance, and so close together on both sides that, were other conditions equal, an active man might easily spring from one room into another across the street.

There were, of course, many other people in the street besides themselves, else Edith's self-imposed piece of espionage would have been rendered difficult, if not impossible.

(To be continued.)

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