CLOSE QUARTERS;

OR, THE HOUSE IN THE RUE BARBETTE

CHAPTER XVII.—(Cont'd)

They sped across the waves towards the Chateau d'If, and drew up alongside its small landing-stage.

The island supplies an all-the-year-round resort for the towns-people. Every fine day a steamer runs at intervals to and fro between it and the inner harbor. The good folk of the south of France, whether Marseilles or visitors to the city, find a constant delight in taking the short marine excursion and wandering for half an hour about the rocky pathways and steep turrents of the famous prison, whilst they listen with silent awe to the words of the guide when he tells them how the Abbe died, and shows them the hole between the two walls excavated by Monte Cristo.

They wandered round with the crowd until Edith looked at her watch.

"It is past twelve o'clock," she said. "Should we not be going back to the hotel to lunch? You will come with us, of course, Mr. Daubeney?"

"I am famished with expectation," answered the irrespressible Jimmy, "but before we go away you certainly ought to climb to the leads and get the panoramic view of the harbor which the tower affords on a clear day. It is a sight to be remembered.

So they made the ascent, Daubeney leading in his capacity of guide, though he was quite breathless when they reached the top.

Edith followed him, and to her alarm perceived that he was purple in the face. He tried to smile, and indicate by a gesture that he would recover in a minute. Meanwhile he was speechless.

Fairholme was the next up. He had hardly set foot on the roof before he exclaimed—

"Well, I'm darned!"

Edith turned round quickly.

"What on earth is the matter?" she cried. "Why are you using such horrid language? Mr. Daubeney only hurried a little too fast, that is all."

Fairholme dropped his voice to a whisper.

"Look," he said, indicating with his eyes a distant corner.

Edith followed his glance, and instantly comprehended the cause of his startled exclamation. For in that quiet spot, far removed from watchful police or inquisitive hotel-servants, stood four men, whom she could not fail to recognize as Gros Jean, Hussein-ul-Mulk, and the other two Turks, although, of course, until this moment she had never previously set eyes on them.

She instantly understood that they must continue to talk and act in the guise of ordinary tourists. In this respect the presence of Daubeney was invaluable, for he naturally could not guess the community of interest between his aristocratic friends and the motely group in the corner.

As soon as he regained his breath, Edith and he commenced a lively conversation. Sir Hubert joined them, and in the course of their casual stroll round the tower they passed close to the Frenchmen and his companions, attracting a casual glance from the former, who instantly set them down as English people bound for the East, and whiling away a few hours in Marseilles prior to the departure of their steamer.

But another surprise awaited them.

A small staircase led to the top of the turret, which, as already described, formed part of the angle that sheltered the group of men.

When Edith and the others strolled past the door they glanced inside and caught sight of a shabby-looking Frenchman, who had paused halfway up the stairs, and was leaning eagerly forward through an embrazured loophole, obviously intent on hearing every word uttered by the quartette beneath.

Fortunately, Edith, who was nearest the door, was completely shrouded from Gros Jean's observation, else that astute gentleman might have noticed her involuntary start or suprise. For the shabby-looking Frenchman was her brother.

The instant Talbot heard footsteps he naturally turned to see who it was that approached, and he also was amazed to find Edith's wondering eyes fixed upon him at a distance of only a few feet.

She nodded her head and placed a warning finger upon her lips. As it happened, Daubeney caught her in the act, and for the next few moments that gentleman's emotions were intense, not to say painful.

"You seem to be preoccupied, Mr. Daubeney. What has happened?" she inquired.

"I—I—really don't know."

His distress was so unmistakable that her quick woman's wit divined the true cause. They had now sauntered some distance away from the part of the tower that might be marked "dangerous," so she grasped Jimmy's ponderous arm, and whispered with a smile—

"You saw me make signs to that Frenchman, didn't you"

"Well—er—I—er—"

"Oh, yes, I understand. Of course you were surprised. But don't jump now, or say anything; he is my brother!"

She need not have warned Daubeney as to any reamrks he might feel inclined to make, for her announcement again rendered him speechless.

"It is a mystery," she whispered, "a deep secret. We will tell you all about it at lunch."

CHAPTER XVIII.

Sublimely unconscious of the excitement raging in their breasts, Sir Hubert Fitzjames could not understand why they each and all answered him in such a flurried manner when he dilated upon the beauties of the bay. Finally he turned to Edith with an air of apprehension.

"I fear," he said, "that your expedition of last night has upset you. Have you a headache?"

Then she could contain her news no longer. Drawing him close to the rampart, and bending down so as to apparently take a deep interest in the laughing excursionists beneath, she murmured—

"Listen to me carefully, uncle. Don't look around. Have you noticed the party of Turks and a Frenchman grouped together in the opposite corner?"

"Yes," he said. "You do not mean to tell me that they are the people whom Mr. Brett met this morning at the station?"

"Yes, unquestionably they are. But the most marvellous thing remains. You know the turret close to which they are standing?"

"Yes."

"Well, in the staircase leading to the top, and leaning out through a window, trying to hear what they are saying, is Jack!"

"What an extraordinary thing," said the major-general, who was really very annoyed that such a meeting should have taken place under his very nose and its significance remain hidden from him.

"Can we do anything?" he added.

"Nothing save to remain here a little longer and be most careful not to appear to have the least knowledge of their identity."

They were joined by Daubeney and Fairholme, and Edith knew by a single glance at the expressive expanse of the former's face that should he be again brought into close proximity to the Turks and her brother it was quite possible the quick-witted Gros Jean might detect the look of interested amazement which must inevitably appear upon his honest British countenance.

"Bobby," she said at once, "I want you and Mr. Daubeney to go down to the launch. We will join you in a few minutes."

"Certainly," was the reply, for Fairholme knew that some motive lay behind the request. "You cannot do much by remaining here, can you, so I suppose you will not be long?"

"No; uncle, and I will survey the view until it is firmly fixed in our minds. After that it is full steam ahead for the Hotel du Louvre."

The two young men disappeared down the stairs leading to the courtyard.

At this moment, the siren of the small pleasure steamer at the quay announced she was about to make her hourly trip back to the town. Whereupon Gros Jean and the Turks, having apparently ended their consultation, crossed the roof and disappeared.

Instantly Jack Talbot strolled after them, but no sooner had the bulky form of Gros Jean—who was the last of his party—vanished than Talbot ran towards his uncle and sister, and said rapidly—

"Dubois and the girl have gone to Palmero. Gros Jean and the Turks have been in communication with the Sultan, and there is a movement on foot to buy the diamonds. That is all that I can tell you now, but let Mr. Brett know. When I have seen these chaps safely home, I will at once come to the hotel."

Then he, too, vanished.

Edith felt a thrill of elation that her good judgment should have led her to remain sufficiently long on the tower to glean such important information.

When Brett heard the news it seemed to annoy him.

"I feared as much," he said. "I had not much faith in the patrotism of the Young Turks. I wonder how much the Sultan has offered. However, we must possess our souls in peace until Talbot comes here and tells us all that he has learnt. At this moment I cannot help marvelling at the strange coincidence which should have led the Turks and yourself to select the Chateau d'If for a morning stroll. I fully expected that Gros Jean would be in bed. He must have received some startling intelligence to keep him away from the rest after a long journey. Meanwhile, I have not been idle."

Every one awaited with interest his next words, for Brett seldom made such a remark without having something out of the common to communicate.

"I telephoned to Paris," he explained, "to tell the Prefecture that Gros Jean and the Turks had arrived at Marseilles. The police were surprised, and perhaps a little sore, that they had not discovered the fact for themselves, but when I soothed them down they informed me that 'Le Ver'—the diminutive scoundrel whom we rescued from the Rue Barbette—had faithfully kept his appointment with me at the Grand Hotel yesterday.

"It seems that he was much upset when he learnt that I had left. He went straight to the commissary to inform him that, contrary to expectations, the Turks were acting in complete accord with mademoiselle's father. This naturally puzzled the commissary a good deal, and the affair became still stranger when an attache from the Turkish Embassy called a little later and urged the police to do all in their power to discover the whereabouts of Hussein-ul-Mulk, as he was particularly anxious to have a friendly talk with him.

"Close on the heels of the Turk came a confidential messenger from the British Embassy, requesting the latest details, and, when questioned by the commissary, this man admitted that he had in the first instance called to see me at the Grand Hotel.

"In a word, Miss Talbot, I had suspected the existence of the negotiations, which your brother's smart piece of work this morning has confirmed."

Whilst they were talking Fairholme took Daubeney on one side, and with Brett's permission gave him a detailed account of the whole affair.

The Honorable James Daubeney was delighted to be mixed up in this international imbroglio. He told the earl that the Blue Bell was at his disposal at any moment of the day or night she might be required, and it was evident that Daubeney, if nothing else, was a man of action, and his yacht might become very useful.

He had hardly quitted the hotel when a waiter announced that a jeune Feancais wished to see Mr. Brett.

"Show him up," said the barrister, and a moment later Talbot entered. He stood near the door twiddling his hat in his hand until the waiter had gone. Then he told them what had happened since he took up his quarters at the Hotel des Jolies Femmes.

"When I reached there," he said, "I was under the impression that Gros Jean and the Turks were in bed. I hired my room; sent my tin box there, and then settled myself in the cafe to smoke cigarettes and read these vile Marseilles newspapers until lunch time. You may judge my surprise when I saw the three Turks and Gros Jean come out into the street and ask the way to the post-office.

(To be continued.)

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The girl is Ilona Vardis. She is 20 years old, and until she became a great heiress she worked in a fancy goods shop in Budapest, the Hungarian city so famous throughout the world for the beauty of its women. Ilona's parents were of the great masses, and nowhere are social distinctions more closely drawn than in Austria-Hungary. Ilona had to toil twelve hours a day in the shop, and if she dreamed of the fairy prince who seemed beyond reach she did not allow it to interfere with her work. Though she earned only $5.20 a week, that is good pay for a shop girl in Hungary, and her parents needed the money to help keep the pot boiling. The great event in Ilona's life which meant the change in the whole story of her life came two years ago when a rich old man, Jean Kronyl, entered the shop to buy some needles. Like many other men, he was fascinated by her beauty, and he came there again and again, each time buying something as a pretext for his visit.

Miss Ilona Vardis.

Ilona did not know he was rich, for he wore paper cuffs and collars and a shabby coat. He was old, with deeply furrowed forehead and unkempt hair. Neither Ilona or any other girl in the shop knew that he was Kronyl, the great millionaire, who owned vast quantities of real estate. Kronyl made discreet inquiries through detectives, and found that Ilona was as good as she was beautiful; and then began a remarkable quest. He travelled all over Hungary modestly. Quietly he poked around in obscure corners of Budapest, and he even went to Vienna.

He had few friends, and they did not know the object of his journey, which did not leak out until after his death. The object was to find the prettiest working girl in Austria-Hungary; for, having no near relatives of his own, he had then and there decided to find the fairest of all working girls and make her the heir to his vast fortune. For twe years he prosecuted his search, and then when he died he left a will bequeathing all that he possessed to the beautiful young shop girl. And now she is the richest heiress in Europe; and if she has not been wooed by all the eligible men she soon will be courted by most of them.

Kronyl's reason, as given in his will for his strange bequest, was that he wished to enable the prettiest shop girl to marry whomever she desired; for he said that it was unfair that she should be deprived of a suitable husband for lack of a owry.

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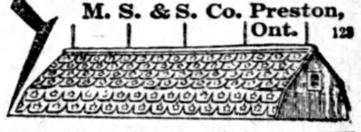

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