CLOSE QUARTERS;

OR, THE HOUSE IN THE RUE BARBETTE

CHAPTER XIX.—(Cont'd)

"What shall we answer?" said Daubeney, breaki·g in upon the barrister's train of thought.

"Oh, say that the signal is fully understood."

Whilst the answering flags were being displayed Daubeney asked—

"What does it all mean?"

"It means," said Brett, "that if the Blue Bell has another yard of speed in her engines we shall need it all. It perhaps will make no material difference in the long run, but as a mere matter of pride I should like to reach Palermo before Gros Jean. If I remember rightly, Palermo is six hours from Messina by rail. Can we do it?"

"Mac," the chief engineer, was consulted. Of course, he would not commit himself.

"We will try darned ha-r-rd," he said.

And with this emphatic resolve the Blue Bell sped onwards through the sunlit sea until, late in the evening, the Ganges was hull down on her quarted.

Macpherson came on deck to take a last look at the P. and O.

"It will be a gr-reat race," he announced, "and I may have to kill a stoker. But——"

Then he dived below again.

The Blue Bell ran merrily on until the small hours of morning, when everybody on board was suddenly awakened by the stoppage of the screw.

The passengers on board the Blue Bell one and all found some pretext to gain the deck in their eagerness to find out why the vessel had slowed down. The answer was a reassuring one. She had burnt a flare for a pilot, and quickly an answering gleam came from afar out of the darkness ahead.

The pilot was soon on board. He was an Italian, but, like most members of his profession doing business in these waters, he spoke French fluently.

Brett asked him how long, with the north-easterly breeze then blowing, a small sailing vessel, such as a schooner-rigged fishing-smack, would take to reach Palermo from Marseilles.

"It is a trip not often made, monsieur," he said. "Fishing vessels from Marseilles are frequently compelled to take shelter under the lea of Corsica or even Sardinia, but here—in Sicily—why should they come here?"

"Oh, I don't mean a schooner engaged in the fishing trade, but rather a small vessel chartered for pleasure, taking the place, as it were, of a private yacht."

"Ah," said the Italian, "that explains it. Well, monsieur, with this breeze I should imagine they would set their course round by the north of Corsica in order to avoid beating through the Straits of Bonifacio. That would make the run about 650 knots, and a smart little vessel carrying all her sails and properly ballasted, might reach Palermo in a few hours over three days."

"Thank you," said Brett. "Is Palmero a difficult port to make?"

"Oh no, monsieur. There is deep water all round here, no shoals, and but few isolated rocks, which are all well known. The only thing to guard against is the changeful current. Brett smiled.

"It would be an ignoble conclusion to the chase if the Belles Soeurs were wrecked with her valuable cargo. I most devoutly pray," he said to himself, "that the breezes and currents may combine to bring Dubois safely on shore. Then I think we can deal with him."

Soon after daybreak the Blue Bell, after a momentary halt at the Customs Station, crept past the Castello a Mare, and amidst much gesticulation, accompanied by a torrent of volcanic Italian, she was tied up to a wharf in the Cala—the small inner harbor of the port.

Edith, who could not sleep since the advent of the pilot, made an early toilet and climbed to the bridge, whence she had a magnificent view of the sunrise over the beautiful city that stands on the Conca d'Ora, or Golden Shell—the smiling and luxuriant plain that seems to be provided by Nature for man's habitation.

Naturally Fairholme was drawn to her side.

"Italy is a fine country," he remarked. "Yet there are more murders to the square inch there than in any other place on earth."

Edith laughed. "Really, Bobby," she pouted, "you are becoming sentimental. I half expect to find you break out into verse."

"I can do that, too," she said, 'though it is not my own. Hasn't Heber got a hymn which tells us of a place where

Every prospect pleases,
And only man is vile.

I forget the rest of it."

Miss Talbot faced him rapidly.

"Bobby, what is the matter with you? I never knew you in such a melting mood before."

"How can I help it?" he half-whispered, laying his hand on her shoulder. "We have never been together so much before in our lives. Don't you realize, Edith, what it means to us if Mr. Brett discovers those diamonds within the next few hours or days?"

He bent closer towards her and his hand passed from her shoulder round her neck. "When we return to England, if you are willing, we can be married within a week."

A bright flush suffused her beautiful face. She bent her head and was silent. It is quite certain that Fairholme would have kissed her had not Daubeney shouted—

"Look here, you two, flirting on the bridge is strictly forbidden. You will demoralize the whole crew. Even the pilot cannot keep his eyes off you."

They laughed and giggled like a couple of children caught stealing gooseberries. Yet the incident and the words were fraught with a solemn significance which often came back to their minds in other days.

The party breakfasted on board and then set out to survey the hotels. Brett's first care was to ascertain the scheduled hours of the train service between Messina and Palermo. To his joy he discovered that neither Winter nor the gang he was shadowing could possibly reach the city until a quarter to four in the afternoon. They decided in favor of the Hotel de France as being most modern in its appearance and centrally situated.

The next thing to do was to provide an efficient watch on all sailing vessels entering the harbor, and here the pilot proved to be a valuable ally. Brett explained to him that he was most anxious to meet some people who were coming from Marseilles on a fishing smack named the Belles Soeurs, No. 107. It was possible, he explained, that both the number and the name might be obliterated, so he wished the pilot, or any helpers he might employ for the duty, to take particular note of all strange boats answering to this description, and at once report their appearance. This the man guaranteed to do. He said that it was quite impossible for a French-rigged smack to enter Palermo without attracting his notice.

By approaching the police authorities and requesting their cooperation, and also using Gros Jean and the Turks as a stalking-horse, Brett felt tolerably certain that the time would soon arrive when Dubois and he would stand face to face.

In making these manifold preparations the morning passed rapidly. The barrister insisted that his companions should go for a drive whilst he busied himself with the necessary details, and they should meet at the hotel for the midday meal. It was then that he singled out Sir Hubert for his personal share in the pursuit.

"You know Mr. Winter?" he said to the baronet.

"Yes, I remember him perfectly."

"In that case I wish you to go to the station and meet the 3:45 p.m. train on arrival. You will probably see the Turks and Gros Jean, but pay no attention to them. Keep a bright lookout for Mr. Winter. Walk up quite openly and speak to him, and the probability is that should Gros Jean have become suspicious of this Englishman who follows in the same track as himself, your presence on the platform will convince him that he was mistaken in imagining the slightest connection between Winter's journey and his own."

"That is good," said the major-general. "It would never have occurred to me. Any other commands?"

"None save this," continued Brett, smiling at the old soldier's eagerness to obey implicitly any instructions given to him. "When you meet Winter, tell him if possible so to direct his movements as to find out Gros Jean's destination, if it can be done without giving the Frenchman the slightest cause for uneasiness. Otherwise the matter is of no consequence. I have already interviewed the chief of police here, and it will only be a question of an hour's delay before the local detectives effectually locate the quarters occupied by Gros Jean and the Turks."

CHAPTER XX.

Sir Hubert was all eagerness to undertake his mission. He reached the station at least half an hour too soon.

At last the train arrived. To Sir Hurbert's delight, he at once caught sight of Gros Jean and the Turks, whom, of course, he quickly identified as to the loungers on the tower of the Chateau d'If.

It occurred to him that there was a remote chance of recognition by Gros Jean, so he busied himself for an instant in a seeming scrutiny of the bookstall until they had passed. A little further down the platform he caught sight of Inspector Winter, that worthy individual being engaged in a fiercely unintelligible controversy with an Italian porter as to the possession of his portmanteau.

Sir Hubert hurried forward, and seized the amazed policeman by his hand, wringing it warmly.

The stolid detective quickly recovered himself, and his first words were— "Did Mr. Brett fully understand my signal?"

"I think so," said the other; "but he will tell you all about that afterwards. At present he wishes you to ascertain Gros Jean's intended residence."

"Oh, that is too easy," he condescended to explain. "I have been talking to him."

"You don't say so!"

"Yes, I have. My French is bad, and his English is worse, but he understands that I am in the wholesale grocery trade. I have come to Palermo to buy currants!"

"Most extraordinary! How very clever of you!"

Mr. Winter drew himself up with an air of professional pride.

"That is nothing, sir," he said. "We often make queer acquaintanceships in the way of business. But Gros Jean is a smart chap. He eyed me curiously when he happened to hear that I was the fifth passenger who wished to leave the steamer at Messina, so I took the bull by the horns and made myself useful to him in the matter of getting his baggage out of the hold."

Meanwhile the subject of their conversation had quitted the station, and Sir Hubert's respect for Mr. Winter's powers as a sleuth-hound yielded to anxiety lest the slippery Frenchman might vanish once and for all.

"Hadn't we better follow him?" he suggested.

Mr. Winter winked knowingly. "Don't be anxious, sir. He wants to be seen in my company. He believes I am here for trading purposes, and the association will be useful to him."

Nevertheless the baronet was glad to find that Mr. Winter's confidence was not misplaced, when, ten minutes later, he again encountered the Frenchman and the Turks at the door of the Campo Santo, a cheap hotel near the square that forms the center of Palermo.

The detective was eminently suited for the role he now filled.

"Ah, monsoo," he cried with boisterous good humor, "permittez-moi introducer un friend of mine, Monsoo Smeeth, de Londres you know. Je ne savez pas les noms de votre companiongs, but they are tres bons camarades, je suis certain."

Gros Jean was most complaisant.

"It ess von grand plaisir, m'sieu," he said, whilst the Turks gravely bowed their acknowledgments.

(To be continued.)

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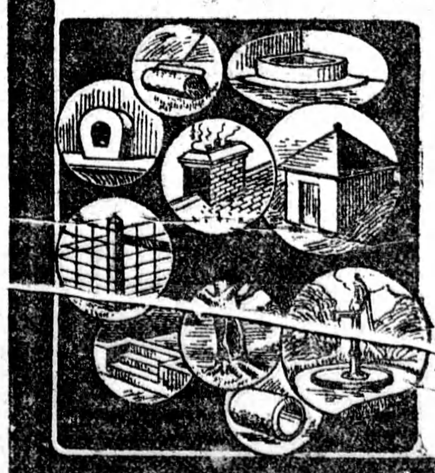

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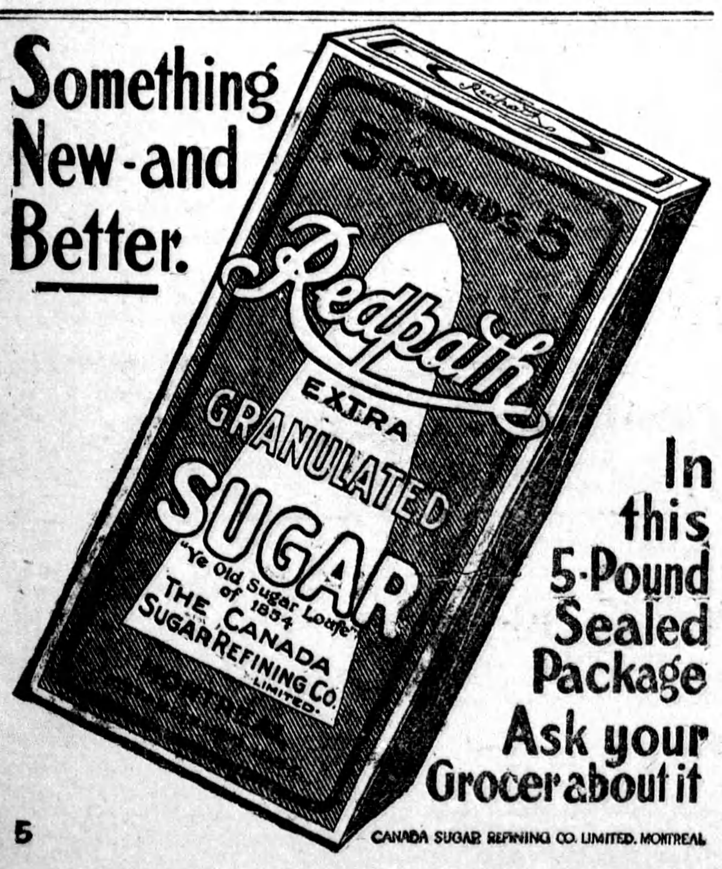

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