CLOSE QUARTERS;

OR, THE HOUSE IN THE RUE BARBETTE

CHAPTER XXI

Dubois had evidently offered his cocchiere a lavish bribe for a quick transit through the city, and the Italian was determined to earn it. By the time they reached the Corso Catafini, which carries the chief artery of Palermo out into the country—crossing the railway and passing the magnificent convent of San Francisco de Sale—the horse was laboring heavily, notwithstanding the efforts of the cabman.

It was at this point, when mounting the bridge, that Dubois knew for certain he was followed. Three hundreds yards behind, he saw Talbot whipping an equally unwilling, but better-conditioned steed than that which carried his own fortunes. At the distance he could not recognize the Englishman, but instinct told him that this impassioned driver was an enemy.

Brett, of course, was not visible, being far in the rear.

"My friend," said Dubois, standing up in the small carriage and leaning against the driver's seat, "I offered you twenty francs if you crossed the city quickly. I will make it forty for another mile at the same pace." "It will kill my horse, signorina."

"Possibly. I will buy you another."

The cocchiere thought that this was a lady of strange manner. There was an odd timbre in her voice, a note of domination not often associated with the fair sex. But she had given earnest of her words by a couple of gold pieces, so he murmured a prayer to his favorite saint that the horse might not die until the right moment.

Now it became evident that the leading horse could barely stagger another fifty yards notwithstanding the inhuman efforts of the cocchiere to make the most of the poor brute's failing energies. At last the animal fell, nearly pulling the driver off his perch.

"My horse is done for signorina," cried the cabman. "It is marvelous that he—Corpo di Bacchо! It is a man!"

Dubois felt that his feminine trappings were no longer a disguise, only a hindrance. He had torn off jacket, skirt, hat and wig.

Some portion of the discarded clothing lay on the seat of the carriage, but Dubois had thrown the skirt over his arm.

"Here! Come back!" yelled the Italian. "What about payment for my dead horse?"

But Dubois paid little heed to him. He was fumbling with the pocket of the skirt as he ran. Not until he had withdrawn a revolver from its folds—whereupon he at once threw away the garment—did the maddening remembrance come to him that he unloaded the weapon prior to the Customs examination, and had forgotten to reinsert the cartridges.

They were in the pocket of his serge coat, the coat which Mademoiselle wore. She, like a prudent young woman, had been careful to reload the revolver she carried, and which she transferred to her new attire when, at the last moment, Dubois suggested the exchange of clothing as a final safeguard in the most unexpected event of police interference with their landing.

For an instant he was tempted to fling the weapon away, but he controlled the impulse.

"As it is," he thought, "this fellow who is pursuing me may not be armed, and I can terrorize him if he comes to close quarters."

Moreover, this superlative scoundrel could feel tightly fastened round his waist a belt containing diamonds worth over a million sterling. Such a ceinture was worth fighting for, whilst his pocketbook contained ample funds for all immediate necessaries.

On the edge of the wood Dubois halted and turned to face his pursuer. Instantly he recognized Talbot, and for the first time in his career a spasm of fear struck upon the Frenchman's heart. In the young Englishman he recognized the only man who had cause to hate him with an implacable animosity.

But the unscrupulous adventurer quickly recovered his nerve.

"So it is you who follow me so closely," he cried. "Go back my friend. This time I will not tie you on a bed. You are becoming dangerous. Go back, I tell you!"

And with these words he leveled the revolver at Talbot's breast, for the latter was now within fifty yards of him. But Jack was animated with the mad elation of a successful chase, and governed by the fierce resolve that his betrayer should not escape him.

Dubois reached a small glade among the trees before he comprehended that his ruthless adversary was still close at his heels. He stopped for the last time, resolved now to have done with this irritating business, once and for all. Talbot too halted, about ten yards from him. He felt that he had the Frenchman at his mercy, and there were a few things he wished to say to him before they closed in mortal combat.

"This time, Henri Dubois," he panted, "I am not drugged and strapped helplessly to a bed. You know why I am here. I have followed you to avenge the stigma you inflicted on my reputation and at the same time to recover the diamonds which you obtained by subterfuge and murder."

The Frenchman was quite collected in manner.

"I murdered no one," he answered. "I could not help the blundering of other people. If I am regretfully compelled to kill you today, it is your own fault. I am only acting in self-defence. How shall we fight?" he calmly demanded.

"Any way you like, you villain. As man to man if you are able. If not, as dog to dog, for I am going to try and kill you!"

"But you are probably armed, whereas I am defenceless? My revolver as you saw, was not loaded."

"We are equal in that respect, if in no other," retorted Talbot.

An evil smile lit up the Frenchman's pallid face. He pulled out his knife with a flourish and hissed—"Then die yourself, you fool!"

He advanced upon Jack with a murderous look in his face. Talbot awaited him, and he, too, smiled.

"You are a liar and a coward to the end!" he cried.

At that instant a cold, clear voice rang out among the trees, close behind the two men.

"Halt!" it cried.

Both men involuntarily paused and turned their eyes to learn whence came this strange interruption. Brett quietly came a few paces nearer.

He held a revolver significantly at Dubois' breast.

"Drop that knife," he said with an icy determination in tone and manner that sent a cold shiver through his hearer's spine.

"Drop it, or I will shoot you this instant!"

Dubois felt that the game was up. He flung down the knife and tried even then to laugh.

"Of course," he sneered, "as I am cornered on all sides I give in."

Brett still advanced until he reached the spot where the knife lay. He picked it up, and at the same instant lowered the revolver. Then he observed, with the easy indifference of one who remarks upon the weather—

"Now, you can fight, monsieur. My young friend here is determined to thrash you, and you richly deserve it. So I will not interfere. But just one word before you begin. Two can play at the game of bluff. This is your own pistol. It is, as you know, unloaded."

Dubois' cry of rage at the trick which had been played on him was smothered by his efforts to close with Talbot, who immediately flung himself upon him with an impetuosity not to be denied.

The fight, while it lasted, was fast and furious.

The two men rolled over and over each other on the ground—one striving to choke the life out of his opponent, the other seeking to rend with teeth and nails.

From the writhing, convulsive bodies, locked together in a deadly struggle, suddenly there came a sharp snap. The Frenchman's right arm was broken near the wrist.

Then Talbot proceeded to wreak his vengeance on him. Unquestionably he would have strangled the man had not Brett interfered, for with his left hand he clutched Dubois' throat, whilst with the right he endeavored to demolish his features. But the barrister, assisted by the Italian pilot—whose after-life was cheered by his ability to relate the details of this Homeric fight—pulled the young man from off his insensible foe.

Talbot regained his feet. Panting with exertion, he glared down at the prostrate form, but Brett, being practical-minded, knelt by the Frenchman's side, tore open his shirt, and unfastened the precious belt.

"At last!" he murmured.

Peering into one of the pockets, which by the way of its bulging he thought would contain the "Imperial diamond," he looked up at Talbot with the words—

"Now, Jack, we are even with him."

It was the first time he had addressed Talbot by his familiar and Christian name. The very souud brought back the other man to a conscious state of his surroundings, and in the same instant a great weakness came over him, for the terrible exertions of the past few minutes had utterly exhausted him.

"I can not even thank you, for I am done up. But I owe it all to you, old man. If it had not been for you we should never have found him."

Brett's grave face wrinkled in a kindly smile.

"I think," he said, "we are even on that score. If you had not followed this rascal he might have escaped at the finish, and my pride would never have recovered from the shock. However, go and sit down for a minute or two and you will soon pull yourself together."

The Frenchman regained consciousness.

"Be good enough to remain quite still, M. Dubois," said Brett soothingly. "You have reached the end of your rope, and we do not even need to tie you."

With the aid of some handkerchief's and a couple of saplings cut by the Italian he managed roughly to bind the fractured limb. Then he assisted Dubois to his feet.

"Come," he said, "we are regretfully compelled to bring you back to town, but we will endeavor to make the journey as comfortable as possible for you. In any event, the horses will not travel so fast."

In the roadway they found the carriages where they had left them, whilst three wondering cocchieri were exchanging opinions as to the mad behaviour of the foreigners.

Brett and the Frenchman entered one vehicle, Talbot and the pilot the other.

"But, gentlemen," moaned the disconsolate cabman who had headed the procession from Palermo, "and who will pay me for my dead horse?"

"I know not," replied Brett. "In any event you had better occupy the vacant seat and drive those two gentleman to the city, where you can secure the means of bringing back your carriage."

In this guise the party returned to Palermo, evoking much wonderment all the way through the Corso Vittorio Emmanuele, whence no fewer than six outraged policemen followed them to the Hotel de France to obtain their names and addresses.

CHAPTER XXII.

Palermo was in a perfect ferment. Not since the last revolution had people seen such a pitched battle in the streets, for Macpherson and his myrmidons had used no gentle means to pacify Gros Jean and the Turks, whilst the crew of the Belles Soeurs would not be in a fit state to go to sea for many days.

An excited mob of people surrounded the hotel when Brett and Talbot arrived with their wounded prisoner. Fortunately the Chief of Police came in person to ascertain the cause of all this turmoil. The first alarmist report that reached his ears made out that a species of international warfare had broken out in the harbor.

He told his subordinates to clear away the crowd, and explanations by Brett and Winter soon demonstrated the wisdom of an official communique to the Press that the row on the pier was merely the outcome of a quarrel between some intoxicated sailors.

The Chief of Police politely offered to place detectives at the disposal of the Englishman for the proper custody of their captive. Brett thanked him, but declined the proffered assistance.

"The only prisoner of interest," he explained, "received such severe injuries during the struggle which he brought on himself that he will be quite unable to be moved for several days. His right arm is broken, and his face has been reduced to a pulp. There is a stout Frenchman named Beaucaire and three Turks who accompanied him, whom I recommend to your safe custody. We bring no charge against them, but it would be as well to keep them under lock and key until we have left Palermo."

(To be continued.)

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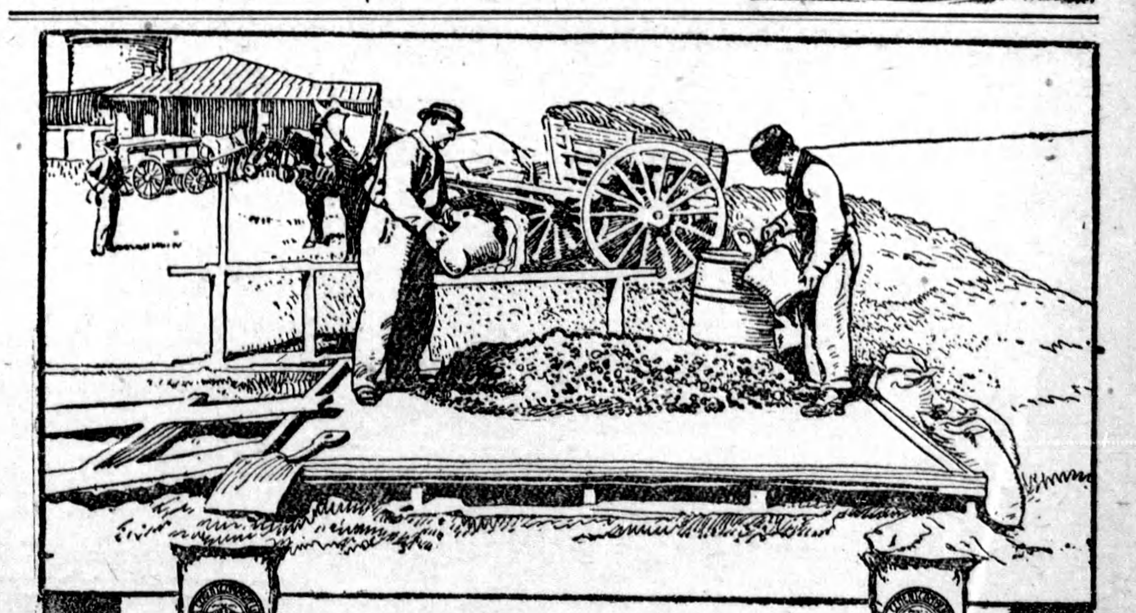

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