

Through the Wall

By CLEVELAND MOFFETT

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CHAPTER XV. THE WOODCARVER.

HE woodcarver kept his appointment the next day at the Bonnetons'. More than that, he seemed in excellent spirits, and as he sat down to Mother Bonneton's modest luncheon he nodded good naturedly to Matthieu, the substitute watchman, whom the sacristan introduced.

The woodcarver had thick brown hair, a short yellowish mustache and a close cut brown beard. He was dressed, like a superior workman, in a flannel shirt, a rough blue suit, oil stained and dust sprinkled, and he wore thick soled boots. The detective was forced to admit that if this was a disguise it was the most admirable one he had ever seen.

During the meal Groener talked freely, speaking with a slight Belgian accent, but fluently enough. He seemed to have a naive spirit of drollery. M. Paul marveled at the man's self possession. Not a tone or a glance or a muscle betrayed him. It was marvelous acting, an extraordinary make-up, but this was his man, all right. There was the long little finger plainly visible, the identical finger of his seventeenth century cast.

The woodcarver went on to express delight at being back in Paris, where his work would keep him three or four days. Business was brisk, thank heaven, with an extraordinary demand for old sideboards with carved panels of the Louis XV. period, which they turned out by the dozen—ha, ha, ha—in the Brussels shop. Across the table Matthieu showed his appreciation of this trick in art catering, and he made bold to ask M. Groener if there would be any chance for a man like himself in a woodcarving shop. His present job at Notre-Dame was for only a few days.

"I'll help you with pleasure," he said. "But today I enjoy myself. This afternoon I escort my pretty cousin Alice to her home in Paris."

Since the meal began Alice had scarcely spoken, but had sat looking down at her plate, save at certain moments when she would lift her eyes suddenly and fix them on Groener with a strange, half frightened expression.

"You are very kind, Cousin Adolf," she answered timidly, "but I'm not feeling well today."

The girl hesitated, and Mother Bonneton put in harshly: "I'll tell you, she's flitting about that American who was sent to prison. A good riddance it was."

"Stop!" cried Alice. "No, no! I'll tell it all. When a girl slips away from her work at the church and goes to see a man like Paul Coquennil—"

"Have you never heard of Paul Coquennil?" smiled Matthieu, kicking Papa Bonneton warningly under the table. Groener answered with perfect simplicity: "No wonder you smile, M. Matthieu. But think how far away from Paris I live! Besides, I want this to be a happy day. Come, little cousin; you shall tell me all about it when we are out together. Run along now and put on your nice dress and hat."

Alice rose from the table, deathly white. It seemed to Coquennil that her eyes met his in desperate appeal, and then, with a glance at Groener, hat of submission, half of defiance, she left the room.

Matthieu bowed politely, and followed by the sacristan, went out.

"Now, Bonneton," ordered the detective sharply when they were in the lower hallway, "I want you to go right across to Notre Dame, and when you get to the door take your hat off and stand there for a minute or so fanning yourself. Then Tignol, who's watching in one of these doorways, will come across and join you. Tell him to be ready to move any minute now. He'd better loiter around the corner of the church until he gets a signal from me. I'll wait here. Now, go on."

"I'm going, M. Paul; I'm going," obeyed Bonneton. And he hurried away.

Coquennil saw Alice hurrying toward him, tense with some eager purpose.

"Oh, M. Matthieu!" exclaimed the girl in apparent surprise. "I know who you are. You are M. Coquennil," now whispering.

"Does he know?"

"The girl's hands closed convulsively. She stammered these singular words: 'By heaven, everything!'"

"Is he planning something?"

For a moment Alice hesitated, biting her red lips. Then, with a quick impulse, she lifted her dark eyes to Coquennil. "I must tell you. I have no one else to tell, and I am so distressed, so—so afraid." She caught his hands pleadingly in hers, and he felt that they were icy cold.

"He's planning to take me away—away from Paris. I overheard him just now telling Mother Bonneton to pack my trunk. If he takes me away I—I may never come back."

"See here—you trust me?" asked the detective.

"Oh, yes!"

"You'll do exactly what I tell you?"

"I will," she declared.

"Now, listen. And, speaking slowly and distinctly, the detective gave Alice precise instructions; then he went over them again, point by point.

"Are you sure you understand?" he asked finally.

"Yes, I understand, and I will do what you tell me, but—" She shook her head anxiously. "You don't know my references are my patrons."

you can't understand, what a—she stopped as if searching for a word—"what a wicked man he is."

"I understand a little," answered Coquennil gravely.

It was about 2 o'clock, and under a dazzling sun the trees and buildings of the square were outlined on the asphalt in sharp black shadows. Coquennil took out his watch and proceeded to wind it slowly, at which a beggar dragged himself lazily out of his cool corner and limped across the street.

"A little charity, kind gentleman," he whined as he came nearer.

And a moment later Coquennil and the beggar, who was Papa Tignol, were talking earnestly near the door-keeper's lodge.

Meantime Alice, with new life in her heart, was putting on her best dress and hat, as Groener had hidden her, and presently she joined her cousin in the salon, where he sat smoking a cheap cigar and finishing his talk with Mother Bonneton.

"What time is it?" she asked Groener.

He looked at his watch. "Twenty minutes to 3."

"Would you mind very much if we didn't start until five or ten minutes past 3? I've been troubled about different things lately, so I spoke to Father Anselm yesterday, and he said I might come to him today at a quarter to 3 for confession."

"Will it make you feel happier?"

"Oh, yes, much happier!"

"All right," he nodded. "I'll wait."

"Thank you, I'll hurry right back. I'll be here by ten minutes past 3."

He eyed her keenly. "You needn't trouble to come back. I'll go to the church with you."

There was nothing more to say, and a few minutes later Alice, anxious eyed, entered Notre Dame, followed by the woodcarver.

"Will you wait here, cousin, by my little table?" she asked sweetly.

"You seem anxious to get rid of me," he smiled.

"No, no," she protested. "I thought this chair would be more comfortable."

"Any chair will do for me," he said dryly. "Where is your confessional?"

"On the other side," she led the way, and presently as they came to a confessional box in the space near the sacristy Alice pointed to the name, "Father Anselm."

"Cousin Adolf," she whispered, "if you go along there back of the choir and down a little stairway you will come to the treasure room. It might interest you."

He looked at her in frank amusement. "I'm interested already. I'll get along very nicely here."

The girl entered the confessional. Groener seated himself on one of the little chairs and leaned back, with a

stunned chuckle. Glancing up, he saw Matthieu polishing the carved stalls. Ten minutes passed. Groener rose and paced back and forth nervously. What a time the girl was taking! Then the door of the confessional box opened, and a black robed priest came out and moved solemnly away.

Still Alice lingered. Groener looked at his watch again. Twenty minutes past 3! It was ridiculous.

"Alice!" he called.

There was no answer.

Groener drew aside the curtain. The confessional box was empty. Alice was gone!

The confessional box was one not in use owing to repairs in the wall behind it. These repairs had necessitated the removal of several large stones, replaced temporarily by lengths of supporting timbers, between which a person might easily pass. Coquennil had taken advantage of it to effect Alice's escape. The girl had entered the confessional and had then slipped out through the open wall. And the priest was Tignol!

"I scored on him that time," chuckled Coquennil, rubbing away at the woodwork.

"M. Matthieu!" called Groener. "Would you mind coming here a moment? A most unfortunate thing has happened. Look at that!" And he opened the door of the confessional. "She has gone—run away!"

Matthieu stared in blank surprise. "Not your cousin?"

Groener nodded.

"Yes, my cousin has run away. It makes me sad. Will you join me in a glass at the tavern?"

His companion agreed to this, and a few moments later the two men were seated under the awning of the Three Wise Men.

"Now," began Groener, "I'll explain the trouble between Alice and me. Her mother made one mistake that ruined her life and practically killed her. Still—"

"What mistake was that?" inquired Matthieu, with sympathy.

"Why, she married an American, who was—the less we say about him the better. The point is, Alice is half American, and she is crazy about American men. That's why I had to send her to Paris five years ago."

"And now it's a man in prison. As soon as Mother Bonneton wrote me about it I saw I'd have to take the girl away again. I told her this morning she must pack up her things and go back to Brussels with me, and that made the trouble. She knew I had my eye on her, so she got this priest to help her."

"You mean that Father Anselm helped her to run away?" gasped Matthieu.

"Of course he did. You saw him come out of the confessional, didn't you?"

"Did you see his face?"

"Certainly I did. He passed within ten feet of me. I saw his face distinctly."

"Have another glass," asked the woodcarver, "or shall we go on?"

"Go on—where?"

"Oh, of course you don't know my plan. I will tell you. You see, I must find Alice. I must try to say her from this folly for her mother's sake. Well, I know how to find her."

"How will you find her?"

"I'll tell you as we drive along."

Coquennil accompanied Groener in a

cab to a telegraph office, where the latter sent a message. When they came out Coquennil gave a quick signal with his hand. A moment later Papa Tignol entered the office. They proceeded to a doorway in the Rue Trouchet, which Groener entered after informing the disguised detective that he would return in a few minutes.

"All right," nodded M. Paul. "I'll be patient." And as the woodcarver disappeared he signaled Tignol to surround the house with the assistants he had brought in a cab.

"He's trying to lose us," said the old fox, hurrying up a moment later. "There are three exits here."

"Three?"

"There's a passage from the first courtyard into a second one, and from

that you can go out either into the Place de la Madeleine or the Rue de l'Archeve. I've got a man at each exit."

"It's Mme. Cecile's tea house!" cried Coquennil. "Put the chauffeur with one of your men in the Rue de l'Archeve, bring your other man here, and we'll double him up with this driver."

"Now," went on Coquennil to Tignol, "you and I will take the exit on the Place de la Madeleine."

(To Be Continued.)

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