

CHAPTER II

THE CLAIBORNES, OF WASHINGTON

—the Englishman who is not an Englishman and therefore doubly incomprehensible.—*The Naulahka.*

The girl with the white-plumed hat started and flushed slightly, and her brother glanced over his shoulder toward the restaurant door to see what had attracted her attention.

"'Tis he, the unknown, Dick."

"I must say I like his persistence!" exclaimed the young fellow, turning again to the table. "In America I should call him out and punch his head, but over here—"

"Over here you have better manners," replied the girl, laughing. "But why trouble yourself? He doesn't even look at us. We are of no importance to him whatever. We probably speak a different language."

"But he travels by the same trains; he stops at the same inns; he sits near us at the theater—he even affects the same pictures in the same galleries! It's grow-

THE CLAIBORNES, OF WASHINGTON 21

ing a trifle monotonous; it's really insufferable. I think I shall have to try my stick on him."

"You flatter yourself, Richard," mocked the girl. "He's fully your height and a trifle broader across the shoulders. The lines about his mouth are almost—yes, I should say, quite as firm as yours, though he is a younger man. His eyes are nice blue ones, and they are very steady. His hair is"—she paused to reflect and tilted her head slightly, her eyes wandering for an instant to the subject of her comment—"light brown, I should call it. And he is beardless, as all self-respecting men should be. I'm sure that he is an exemplary person—kind to his sisters and aunts, very willing to sacrifice himself for others and light the candles on his nephews' and nieces' Christmas trees."

She rested her cheek against her lightly-clasped hands and sighed deeply to provoke a continuation of her brother's growling disdain.

The young gentleman to whom she had referred had seated himself at a table not far distant, given an order with some particularity, and settled himself to the reading of a newspaper which he had drawn from the pocket of his blue serge coat. He was at once absorbed, and the presence of the Claibornes gave him apparently not the slightest concern.

"He has a sense of humor," the girl resumed. "I saw him yesterday—"

"You're always seeing him: you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"Don't interrupt me, please. As I was saying, I saw him laughing over the *Fliegende Blätter*."

"But that's no sign he has a sense of humor. It rather proves that he hasn't. I'm disappointed in you, Shirley. To think that my own sister should be able to tell the color of a wandering blackguard's eyes!"

He struck a match viciously, and his sister laughed.

"I might add to his portrait. That blue and white scarf is tied beautifully; and his profile would be splendid in a medallion. I believe from his nose he may be English, after all," she added with a dreamy air assumed to add to her brother's impatience.

"Which doesn't help the matter materially, that I can see!" exclaimed the young man. "With a full beard he'd probably look like a Sicilian bandit. If I thought he was really pursuing you in this darkly mysterious way I should certainly give him a piece of my American mind. You might suppose that a girl would be safe traveling with her brother."

"It isn't your fault, Dick," laughed the girl. "You

know our parents dear were with us when we first began to notice him—that was in Rome. And now that we are alone he continues to follow our trail just the same. It's really diverting; and if you were a good brother you'd find out all about him, and we might even do stunts together—the three of us, with you as the watchful chaperon. You forget how I have worked for you, Dick. I took great chances in forcing an acquaintance with those frosty English people at Florence just because you were crazy about the scrawny blonde who wore the frightful hats. I wash my hands of you hereafter. Your taste in girls is horrible."

"Your mind has been affected by reading these fake-kingdom romances, where a ridiculous prince gives up home and mother and his country to marry the usual beautiful American girl who travels about having silly adventures. I belong to the Know-nothing Party—America for Americans and only white men on guard!"

"Yes, Richard! Your sentiments are worthy, but they'd have more weight if I hadn't seen you staring your eyes out every time we came within a mile of a penny princess. I haven't forgotten your disgraceful conduct in collecting photographs of that homely daugh-

ter of a certain English duke. We'll call the incident closed, little brother."

"Our friend Chauvenet, even," continued Captain Claiborne, "is less persistent—less gloomily present on the horizon. We haven't seen him for a week or two. But he expects to visit Washington this spring. His waistcoats are magnificent. The governor shies every time the fellow unbuttons his coat."

"Mr. Chauvenet is an accomplished man of the world," declared Shirley with an insincere sparkle in her eyes.

"He lives by his wits—and lives well."

Claiborne dismissed Chauvenet and turned again toward the strange young man, who was still deep in his newspaper.

"He's reading the *Neue Freie Presse*," remarked Dick, "by which token I argue that he's some sort of a Dutchman. He's probably a traveling agent for a Vienna glass-factory, or a drummer for a cheap wine-house, or the agent for a Munich brewery. That would account for his travels. We simply fall in with his commercial itinerary."

"You seem to imply, brother, that my charms are not in themselves sufficient. But a commercial traveler hardly commands that fine repose, that distinction—

that air of having been places and seen things and known people—"

"Tush! I have seen American book agents who had all that—even the air of having been places! Your instincts ought to serve you better, Shirley. It's well that we go on to-morrow. I shall warn mother and the governor that you need watching."

Shirley Claiborne's eyes rested again upon the calm reader of the *Neue Freie Presse*. The waiter was now placing certain dishes upon the table without, apparently, interesting the young gentleman in the least. Then the unknown dropped his newspaper, and buttered a roll reflectively. His gaze swept the room for the first time, passing over the heads of Miss Claiborne and her brother unseeingly—with, perhaps, too studied an air of indifference.

"He has known real sorrow," persisted Shirley, her elbows on the table, her fingers interlocked, her chin resting idly upon them. "He's traveling in an effort to forget a blighting grief," the girl continued with mock sympathy.

"Then let us leave him in peace! We can't decently linger in the presence of his sacred sorrow."

Captain Richard Claiborne and his sister Shirley had

stopped at Geneva to spend a week with a younger brother, who was in school there, and were to join their father and mother at Liverpool and sail for home at once. The Claibornes were permanent residents of Washington, where Hilton Claiborne, a former ambassador to two of the greatest European courts, was counsel for several of the embassies and a recognized authority in international law. He had been to Rome to report to the Italian government the result of his efforts to collect damages from the United States for the slaughter of Italian laborers in a railroad strike, and had proceeded thence to England on other professional business.

Dick Claiborne had been ill, and was abroad on leave in an effort to shake off the lingering effects of typhoid fever contracted in the Philippines. He was under orders to report for duty at Fort Myer on the first of April, and it was now late March. He and his sister had spent the morning at their brother's school and were enjoying a late *déjeûner* at the Monte Rosa. There existed between them a pleasant comradeship that was in no wise affected by divergent tastes and temperaments. Dick had just attained his captaincy, and was the youngest man of his rank in the service. He did not know an or-

chid from a hollyhock, but no man in the army was a better judge of a cavalry horse, and if a Wagner recital bored him to death his spirit rose, nevertheless, to the bugle, and he drilled his troop until he could play with it and snap it about him like a whip.

Shirley Claiborne had been out of college a year, and afforded a pleasant refutation of the dull theory that advanced education destroys a girl's charm, or buoyancy, or whatever it is that is so greatly admired in young womanhood. She gave forth the impression of vitality and strength. She was beautifully fair, with a high color that accentuated her youthfulness. Her brown hair, caught up from her brow in the fashion of the early years of the century, flashed gold in sunlight.

Much of Shirley's girlhood had been spent in the Virginia hills, where Judge Claiborne had long maintained a refuge from the heat of Washington. From childhood she had read the calendar of spring as it is written upon the landscape itself. Her fingers found by instinct the first arbutus; she knew where white violets shone first upon the rough breast of the hillsides; and particular patches of rhododendron had for her the intimate interest of private gardens.

Undoubtedly there are deities fully consecrated to

the important business of naming girls, so happily is that task accomplished. Gladys is a child of the spirit of mischief. Josephine wears a sweet gravity, and Mary, too, discourses of serious matters. Nora, in some incarnation, has seen fairies scampering over moor and hill and the remembrance of them teases her memory. Katherine is not so faithless as her ways might lead you to believe. Laura without dark eyes would be impossible, and her predestined Petrarch would never deliver his sonnets. Helen may be seen only against a background of Trojan wall. Gertrude must be tall and fair and ready with ballads in the winter twilight. Julia's reserve and discretion commend her to you; but she has a heart of laughter. Anne is to be found in the rose garden with clipping-shears and a basket. Hilda is a capable person; there is no ignoring her militant character; the battles of Saxon kings ring still in her blood. Marjorie has scribbled verses in secret, and Celia is the quietest auditor at the symphony. And you may have observed that there is no button on Elizabeth's foil; you do well not to clash wits with her. Do you say that these ascriptions are not square with your experience? Then verily there must have been a sad mixing of infant candidates for the font in your parish.

Shirley, in such case, will mean nothing to you. It is a waste of time to tell you that the name may become audible without being uttered; you can not be made to understand that the *r* and *l* slip into each other as ripples glide over pebbles in a brook. And from the name to the girl—may you be forever denied a glimpse of Shirley Claiborne's pretty head, her brown hair and dream-haunted eyes, if you do not first murmur the name with honest liking.

As the Claibornes lingered at their table a short stout man espied them from the door and advanced beamingly.

"Ah, my dear Shirley, and Dick! Can it be possible! I only heard by the merest chance that you were here. But Switzerland is the real meeting-place of the world."

The young Americans greeted the new-comer cordially. A waiter placed a chair for him, and took his hat. Arthur Singleton was an American, though he had lived abroad so long as to have lost his identity with any particular city or state of his native land. He had been an attaché of the American embassy at London for many years. Administrations changed and ambassadors came and went, but Singleton was never molested. It was said

that he kept his position on the score of his wide acquaintance; he knew every one, and he was a great peddler of gossip, particularly about people in high station.

The children of Hilton Claiborne were not to be overlooked. He would impress himself upon them, as was his way; for he was sincerely social by instinct, and would go far to do a kindness for people he really liked.

"Ah me! You have arrived opportunely, Miss Claiborne. There's mystery in the air—the great Stroebel is here—under this very roof and in a dreadfully bad humor. He is a dangerous man—a very dangerous man, but failing fast. Poor Austria! Count Ferdinand von Stroebel can have no successor—he's only a sort of hold-over from the nineteenth century, and with him and his Emperor out of the way—what? For my part I see only dark days ahead;" and he concluded with a little sigh that implied crumbling thrones and falling dynasties.

"We met him in Vienna," said Shirley Claiborne, "when father was there before the Ecuador Claims Commission. He struck me as being a delightful old grizzly bear."

"He will have his place in history; he is a statesman of the old blood and iron school; he is the peer of Bismarck, and some things he has done. He holds more

secrets than any other man in Europe—and you may be quite sure that they will die with him. He will leave no memoirs to be poked over by his enemies—no post-mortem confidences from him!"

The reader of the *Neue Freie Presse*, preparing to leave his table, tore from the newspaper an article that seemed to have attracted him, placed it in his card-case, and walked toward the door. The eyes of Arthur Singleton lighted in recognition, and the attaché, muttering an apology to the Claibornes, addressed the young gentleman cordially.

"Why, Armitage, of all men!" and he rose, still facing the Claibornes, with an air of embracing the young Americans in his greetings. He never liked to lose an auditor; and he would, in no circumstances, miss a chance to display the wide circumference of his acquaintance.

"Shirley—Miss Claiborne—allow me to present Mr. Armitage." The young army officer and Armitage then shook hands, and the three men stood for a moment, detained, it seemed, by the old attaché, who had no engagement for the next hour or two and resented the idea of being left alone.

"One always meets Armitage!" declared Singleton.

"He knows our America as well as we do—and very well indeed—for an Englishman."

Armitage bowed gravely.

"You make it necessary again for me to disavow any allegiance to the powers that rule Great Britain. I'm really a fair sort of American—I have sometimes told New York people all about—Colorado—Montana—New Mexico!"

His voice and manner were those of a gentleman. His color, as Shirley Claiborne now observed, was that of an outdoors man; she was familiar with it in soldiers and sailors, and knew that it testified to a vigorous and wholesome life.

"Of course you're not English!" exclaimed Singleton, annoyed as he remembered, or thought he did, that Armitage had on some other occasion made the same protest.

"I'm really getting sensitive about it," said Armitage, more to the Claibornes than to Singleton. "But must we all be from somewhere? Is it so melancholy a plight to be a man without a country?"

The mockery in his tone was belied by the good humor in his face; his eyes caught Shirley's passingly, and she smiled at him—it seemed a natural, a perfectly inevita-

ble thing to do. She liked the kind tolerance with which he suffered the babble of Arthur Singleton, whom some one had called an international bore. The young man's dignity was only an expression of self-respect; his appreciation of the exact proprieties resulting from this casual introduction to herself and her brother was perfect. He was already withdrawing. A waiter had followed him with his discarded newspaper—and Armitage took it and idly dropped it on a chair.

"Have you heard the news, Armitage? The Austrian sphinx is here—in this very house!" whispered Singleton impressively.

"Yes; to be sure, Count von Stroebel is here, but he will probably not remain long. The Alps will soon be safe again. I am glad to have met you." He bowed to the Claibornes inclusively, nodded in response to Singleton's promise to look him up later, and left them.

When Shirley and her brother reached their common sitting-room Dick Claiborne laughingly held up the copy of the *Neue Freie Presse* which Armitage had cast aside at their table.

"Now we shall know!" he declared, unfolding the newspaper.

"Know what, Dick?"

"At least what our friend without a country is so interested in."

He opened the paper, from which half a column had been torn, noted the date, rang the bell, and ordered a copy of the same issue. When it was brought he opened it, found the place, laughed loudly, and passed the sheet over to his sister.

"Oh, Shirley, Shirley! This is almost too much!" he cried, watching her as her eyes swept the article. She turned away to escape his noise, and after a glance threw down the paper in disgust. The article dealt in detail with Austro-Hungarian finances, and fairly bristled with figures and sage conclusions based upon them.

"Isn't that the worst!" exclaimed Shirley, smiling ruefully.

"He's certainly a romantic figure ready to your hand. Probably a bank-clerk who makes European finance his recreation."

"He isn't an Englishman, at any rate. He repudiated the idea with scorn."

"Well, your Mr. Armitage didn't seem so awfully excited at meeting Singleton; but he seemed rather satisfied with your appearance, to put it mildly. I wonder if he had arranged with Singleton to pass by in that purely

incidental way, just for the privilege of making your acquaintance!"

"Don't be foolish, Dick. It's unbecoming an officer and a gentleman. But if you should see Mr. Singleton again—"

"Yes—not if I see him *first!*" ejaculated Claiborne.

"Well, you might ask him who Mr. Armitage is. It would be amusing—and satisfying—to know."

Later in the day the old attaché fell upon Claiborne in the smoking-room and stopped to discuss a report that a change was impending in the American State Department. Changes at Washington did not trouble Singleton, who was sure of his tenure. He said as much; and after some further talk, Claiborne remarked:

"Your friend Armitage seems a good sort."

"Oh, yes; a capital talker, and thoroughly well posted in affairs."

"Yes, he seemed interesting. Do you happen to know where he lives—when he's at home?"

"Lord bless you, boy, I don't know anything about Armitage!" spluttered Singleton, with the emphasis so thrown as to imply that of course in any other branch of human knowledge he would be found abundantly qualified to answer questions.

"But you introduced us to him—my sister and me. I assumed—"

"My dear Claiborne, I'm always introducing people! It's my business to introduce people. Armitage is all right. He's always around everywhere. I've dined with him in Paris, and I've rarely seen a man order a better dinner."

CHAPTER III

DARK TIDINGS

The news I bring is heavy in my tongue.—*Shakespeare.*

The second day thereafter Shirley Claiborne went into a jeweler's on the Grand Quai to purchase a trinket that had caught her eye, while she waited for Dick, who had gone off in their carriage to the post-office to send some telegrams. It was a small shop, and the time early afternoon, when few people were about. A man who had preceded her was looking at watches, and seemed deeply absorbed in this occupation. She heard his inquiries as to quality and price, and knew that it was Armitage's voice before she recognized his tall figure. She made her purchase quickly, and was about to leave the shop, when he turned toward her and she bowed.

"Good afternoon, Miss Claiborne. These are very tempting bazaars, aren't they? If the abominable tariff laws of America did not give us pause—"

He bent above her, hat in hand, smiling. He had con-