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CHAPTER IV

JOHN ARMITAGE A PRISONER

All things are bright in the track of the sun,
All things are fair I see;
And the light in a golden tide has run
Down out of the sky to me.

And the world turns round and round and round,
And my thought sinks into the sea;
The sea of peace and of joy profound
Whose tide is mystery.

—S. W. Duffield.

The man whom John Armitage expected arrived at the Hotel Monte Rosa a few hours after the Claibornes' departure.

While he waited, Mr. Armitage employed his time to advantage. He carefully scrutinized his wardrobe, and after a process of elimination and substitution he packed his raiment in two trunks and was ready to leave the inn at ten minutes' notice. Between trains, when not engaged in watching the incoming travelers, he smoked a pipe over various packets of papers and letters, and

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these he burned with considerable care. All the French and German newspaper accounts of the murder of Count von Stroebel he read carefully; and even more particularly he studied the condition of affairs in Vienna consequent upon the great statesman's death. Secret agents from Vienna and detectives from Paris had visited Geneva in their study of this astounding crime, and had made much fuss and asked many questions; but Mr. John Armitage paid no heed to them. He had held the last conversation of length that any one had enjoyed with Count Ferdinand von Stroebel, but the fact of this interview was known to no one, unless to one or two hotel servants, and these held a very high opinion of Mr. Armitage's character, based on his generosity in the matter of gold coin; and there could, of course, be no possible relationship between so shocking a tragedy and a chance acquaintance between two travelers. Mr. Armitage knew nothing that he cared to impart to detectives, and a great deal that he had no intention of imparting to any one. He accumulated a remarkable assortment of time-tables and advertisements of transatlantic sailings against sudden need, and even engaged passage on three steamers sailing from English and French ports within the week.

He expected that the person for whom he waited would go direct to the Hotel Monte Rosa for the reason that Shirley Claiborne had been there; and Armitage was not mistaken. When this person learned that the Claibornes had left, he would doubtless hurry after them. This is the conclusion that was reached by Mr. Armitage, who, at times, was singularly happy in his speculations as to the mental processes of other people. Sometimes, however, he made mistakes, as will appear.

The gentleman for whom John Armitage had been waiting arrived alone, and was received as a distinguished guest by the landlord.

Monsieur Chauvenet inquired for his friends the Claibornes, and was clearly annoyed to find that they had gone; and no sooner had this intelligence been conveyed to him than he, too, studied time-tables and consulted steamer advertisements. Mr. John Armitage in various discreet ways was observant of Monsieur Chauvenet's activities, and bookings at steamship offices interested him so greatly that he reserved passage on two additional steamers and ordered the straps buckled about his trunks, for it had occurred to him that he might find it necessary to leave Geneva in a hurry.

It was not likely that Monsieur Chauvenet, being now

under his eyes, would escape him; and John Armitage, making a leisurely dinner, learned from his waiter that Monsieur Chauvenet, being worn from his travels, was dining alone in his rooms.

At about eight o'clock, as Armitage turned the pages of *Figaro* in the smoking-room, Chauvenet appeared at the door, scrutinized the group within, and passed on. Armitage had carried his coat, hat and stick into the smoking-room, to be ready for possible emergencies; and when Chauvenet stepped out into the street he followed.

It was unusually cold for the season, and a fine drizzle filled the air. Chauvenet struck off at once away from the lake, turned into the Boulevard Helvétique, thence into the Boulevard Froissart with its colony of *pensions*. He walked rapidly until he reached a house that was distinguished from its immediate neighbors only by its unlighted upper windows. He pulled the bell in the wall, and the door was at once opened and instantly closed.

Armitage, following at twenty yards on the opposite side of the street, paused abruptly at the sudden ending of his chase. It was not an hour for loitering, for the Genevan *gendarmérie* have rather good eyes, but Armitage had by no means satisfied his curiosity as to the na-

ture of Chauvenet's errand. He walked on to make sure he was unobserved, crossed the street, and again passed the dark, silent house which Chauvenet had entered. He noted the place carefully; it gave no outward appearance of being occupied. He assumed, from the general plan of the neighboring buildings, that there was a courtyard at the rear of the darkened house, accessible through a narrow passageway at the side. As he studied the situation he kept moving to avoid observation, and presently, at a moment when he was quite alone in the street, walked rapidly to the house Chauvenet had entered.

Gentlemen in search of adventures do well to avoid the continental wall. Mr. Armitage brushed the glass from the top with his hat. It jingled softly within under cover of the rain-drip. The plaster had crumbled from the bricks in spots, giving a foot its opportunity, and Mr. Armitage drew himself to the top and dropped within. The front door and windows stared at him blankly, and he committed his fortunes to the bricked passageway. The rain was now coming down in earnest, and at the rear of the house water had begun to drip noisily into an iron spout. The electric lights from neighboring streets made a kind of twilight even in the

darkened court, and Armitage threaded his way among a network of clothes-lines to the rear wall and viewed the premises. He knew his Geneva from many previous visits; the quarter was undeniably respectable; and there is, to be sure, no reason why the blinds of a house should not be carefully drawn at nightfall at the pleasure of the occupants. The whole lower floor seemed utterly deserted; only at one point on the third floor was there any sign of light, and this the merest hint.

The increasing fall of rain did not encourage loitering in the wet courtyard, where the downspout now rattled dolorously, and Armitage crossed the court and further assured himself that the lower floor was dark and silent. Balconies were bracketed against the wall at the second and third stories, and the slight iron ladder leading thither terminated a foot above his head. John Armitage was fully aware that his position, if discovered, was, to say the least, untenable; but he was secure from observation by police, and he assumed that the occupants of the house were probably too deeply engrossed with their affairs to waste much time on what might happen without. Armitage sprang up and caught the lowest round of the ladder, and in a moment his tall figure was a dark blur against the wall as he crept

warily upward. The rear rooms of the second story were as dark and quiet as those below. Armitage continued to the third story, where a door, as well as several windows, gave upon the balcony; and he found that it was from a broken corner of the door shade that a sharp blade of light cut the dark. All continued quiet below; he heard the traffic of the neighboring thoroughfares quite distinctly; and from a kitchen near by came the rough clatter of dishwashing to the accompaniment of a quarrel in German between the maids. For the moment he felt secure, and bent down close to the door and listened.

Two men were talking, and evidently the matter under discussion was of importance, for they spoke with a kind of dogged deliberation, and the long pauses in the dialogue lent color to the belief that some weighty matter was in debate. The beat of the rain on the balcony and its steady rattle in the spout intervened to quell the sound of voices, but presently one of the speakers, with an impatient exclamation, rose, opened the small glass-paned door a few inches, peered out, and returned to his seat with an exclamation of relief. Armitage had dropped down the ladder half a dozen rounds as he heard the latch snap in the door. He waited an instant

to make sure he had not been seen, then crept back to the balcony and found that the slight opening in the door made it possible for him to see as well as hear.

"It's stifling in this hole," said Chauvenet, drawing deeply upon his cigarette and blowing a cloud of smoke. "If you will pardon the informality, I will lay aside my coat."

He carefully hung the garment upon the back of his chair to hold its shape, then resumed his seat. His companion watched him meanwhile with a certain intentness.

"You take excellent care of your clothes, my dear Jules. I never have been able to fold a coat without ruining it."

The rain was soaking Armitage thoroughly, but its persistent beat covered any slight noises made by his own movements, and he was now intent upon the little room and its occupants. He observed the care with which the man kept close to his coat, and he pondered the matter as he hung upon the balcony. If Chauvenet was on his way to America it was possible that he would carry with him the important paper whose loss had caused so much anxiety to the Austrian minister; if so, where was it during his stay in Geneva?

"The old man's death is only the first step. We require a succession of deaths."

"We require three, to be explicit, not more or less. We should be fortunate if the remaining two could be accomplished as easily as Stroebe's."

"He was a beast. He is well dead."

"That depends on the way you look at it. They seem really to be mourning the old beggar at Vienna. It is the way of a people. They like to be ruled by a savage hand. The people, as you have heard me say before, are fools."

The last speaker was a young man whom Armitage had never seen before; he was a decided blond, with close-trimmed straw-colored beard and slightly-curling hair. Opposite him, and facing the door, sat Chauvenet. On the table between them were decanters and liqueur glasses.

"I am going to America at once," said Chauvenet, holding his filled glass toward a brass lamp of an old type that hung from the ceiling.

"It is probably just as well," said the other. "There's work to do there. We must not forget our more legitimate business in the midst of these pleasant side issues."

"The field is easy. After our delightful continental

capitals, where, as you know, one is never quite sure of one's self, it is pleasant to breathe the democratic airs of Washington," remarked Chauvenet.

"Particularly so, my dear friend, when one is blessed with your delightful social gifts. I envy you your capacity for making others happy."

There was a keen irony in the fellow's tongue and the edge of it evidently touched Chauvenet, who scowled and bent forward with his fingers on the table.

"Enough of that, if you please."

"As you will, *carino*; but you will pardon me for offering my condolences on the regrettable departure of *la belle Americaine*. If you had not been so intent on matters of state you would undoubtedly have found her here. As it is, you are now obliged to see her on her native soil. A month in Washington may do much for you. She is beautiful and reasonably rich. Her brother, the tall captain, is said to be the best horseman in the American army."

"Humph! He is an ass," ejaculated Chauvenet.

A servant now appeared bearing a fresh bottle of cordial. He was distinguished by a small head upon a tall and powerful body, and bore little resemblance to a house servant. While he brushed the cigar ashes from

the table the men continued their talk without heeding him.

Chauvenet and his friend had spoken from the first in French, but in addressing some directions to the servant, the blond, who assumed the rôle of host, employed a Servian dialect.

"I think we were saying that the mortality list in certain directions will have to be stimulated a trifle before we can do our young friend Francis any good. You have business in America, *carino*. That paper we filched from old Stroebel strengthens our hold on Francis; but there is still that question as to Karl and Frederick Augustus. Our dear Francis is not satisfied. He wishes to be quite sure that his dear father and brother are dead. We must reassure him, dearest Jules."

"Don't be a fool, Durand. You never seem to understand that the United States of America is a trifle larger than a barnyard. And I don't believe those fellows are over there. They're probably lying in wait here somewhere, ready to take advantage of any opportunity,—that is, if they are alive. A man can hardly fail to be impressed with the fact that so few lives stand between him and—"

"The heights—the heights!" And the young man,

whom Chauvenet called Durand, lifted his tiny glass airily.

"Yes; the heights," repeated Chauvenet a little dreamily.

"But that declaration—that document! You have never honored me with a glimpse; but you have it put safely away, I dare say."

"There is no place—but one—that I dare risk. It is always within easy reach, my dear friend."

"You will do well to destroy that document. It is better out of the way."

"Your deficiencies in the matter of wisdom are unfortunate. That paper constitutes our chief asset, my dear associate. So long as we have it we are able to keep dear Francis in order. Therefore we shall hold fast to it, remembering that we risked much in removing it from the lamented Stroebel's archives."

"Do you say 'risked much'? My valued neck, that is all!" said the other. "You and Winkelried are without gratitude."

"You will do well," said Chauvenet, "to keep an eye open in Vienna for the unknown. If you hear murmurs in Hungary one of these fine days—! Nothing has happened for some time; therefore much may happen."

He glanced at his watch.

"I have work in Paris before sailing for New York. Shall we discuss the matter of those Peruvian claims? That is business. These other affairs are more in the nature of delightful diversions, my dear comrade."

They drew nearer the table and Durand produced a box of papers over which he bent with serious attention. Armitage had heard practically all of their dialogue, and, what was of equal interest, had been able to study the faces and learn the tones of voice of the two conspirators. He was cramped from his position on the narrow balcony and wet and chilled by the rain, which was now slowly abating. He had learned much that he wished to know, and with an ease that astonished him; and he was well content to withdraw with gratitude for his good fortune.

His legs were numb and he clung close to the railing of the little ladder for support as he crept toward the area. At the second story his foot slipped on the wet iron, smooth from long use, and he stumbled down several steps before he recovered himself. He listened a moment, heard nothing but the tinkle of the rain in the spout, then continued his retreat.

As he stepped out upon the brick courtyard he was

seized from behind by a pair of strong arms that clasped him tight. In a moment he was thrown across the threshold of a door into an unlighted room, where his captor promptly sat upon him and proceeded to strike a light.