

living. This Armitage is not the ordinary pig of a secret agent. We must find him."

"And quickly. There must be—"

"—another death added to our little list before we are quite masters of the situation in Vienna."

They gave Zmai orders to remain on guard at the house and went hurriedly out together.

CHAPTER VI

TOWARD THE WESTERN STARS

Her blue eyes sought the west afar,
For lovers love the western star.

—*Lay of the Last Minstrel.*

Geneva is a good point from which to plan flight to any part of the world, for there at the top of Europe the whole continental railway system is easily within your grasp, and you may make your choice of sailing ports. It is, to be sure, rather out of your way to seek a ship at Liverpool unless you expect to gain some particular advantage in doing so. Mr. John Armitage hurried thither in the most breathless haste to catch the *King Edward*, whereas he might have taken the *Touraine* at Cherbourg and saved himself a mad scamper; but his satisfaction in finding himself aboard the *King Edward* was supreme. He was and is, it may be said, a man who salutes the passing days right amiably, no matter how somber their colors.

Shirley Claiborne and Captain Richard Claiborne, her

brother, were on deck watching the shipping in the Mersey as the big steamer swung into the channel.

"I hope," observed Dick, "that we have shaken off all your transatlantic suitors. That little Chauvenet died easier than I had expected. He never turned up after we left Florence, but I'm not wholly sure that we shan't find him at the dock in New York. And that mysterious Armitage, who spent so much railway fare following us about, and who almost bought you a watch in Geneva, really disappoints me. His persistence had actually compelled my admiration. For a glass-blower he was fairly decent, though, and better than a lot of these little toy men with imitation titles."

"Is that an American cruiser? I really believe it is the *Tecumseh*. What on earth were you talking about, Dick?"

Shirley fluttered her handkerchief in the direction of the American flag displayed by the cruiser, and Dick lifted his cap.

"I was bidding farewell to your foreign suitors, Shirley, and congratulating myself that as soon as *père et mère* get their sea legs they will resume charge of you, and let me look up two or three very presentable specimens of your sex I saw come on board. Your affairs

have annoyed me greatly and I shall be glad to be free of the responsibility."

"Thank you, Captain."

"And if there are any titled blackguards on board—"

"You will do dreadfully wicked things to them, won't you, little brother?"

"Humph! Thank God, I'm an American!"

"That's a worthy sentiment, Richard."

"I'd like to give out, as our newspapers say, a signed statement throwing a challenge to all Europe. I wish we'd get into a real war once so we could knock the conceit out of one of their so-called first-class powers. I'd like to lead a regiment right through the most sacred precincts of London; or take an early morning gallop through Berlin to wake up the Dutch. All this talk about hands across the sea and such rot makes me sick. The English are the most benighted and the most conceited and condescending race on earth; the Germans and Austrians are stale beer-vats, and the Italians and French are mere decadents and don't count."

"Yes, dearest," mocked Shirley. "Oh, my large brother, I have a confession to make. Please don't indulge in great oaths or stamp a hole in this sturdy deck, but there are flowers in my state-room—"

"Probably from the Liverpool consul—he's been pestering father to help him get a transfer to a less gloomy hole."

"Then I shall intercede myself with the President when I get home. They're orchids—from London—but—with Mr. Armitage's card. Wouldn't that excite you?"

"It makes me sick!" and Dick hung heavily on the rail and glared at a passing tug.

"They are beautiful orchids. I don't remember when orchids have happened to me before, Richard—in such quantities. Now, you really didn't disapprove of him so much, did you? This is probably good-by forever, but he wasn't so bad; and he may be an American, after all."

"A common adventurer! Such fellows are always turning up, like bad pennies, or a one-eyed dog. If I should see him again—"

"Yes, Richard, if you should meet again—"

"I'd ask him to be good enough to stop following us about, and if he persisted I should muss him up."

"Yes; I'm sure you would protect me from his importunities at any hazard," mocked Shirley, turning and leaning against the rail so that she looked along the deck beyond her brother's stalwart shoulders.

"Don't be silly," observed Dick, whose eyes were upon a trim yacht that was steaming slowly beneath them.

"I shan't, but please don't be violent! Do not murder the poor man, Dickie, dear,"—and she took hold of his arm entreatingly—"for there he is—as tall and mysterious as ever—and me found guilty with a few of his orchids pinned to my jacket!"

"This is good fortune, indeed," said Armitage a moment later when they had shaken hands. "I finished my errand at Geneva unexpectedly and here I am."

He smiled at the feebleness of his explanation, and joined in their passing comment on the life of the harbor. He was not so dull but that he felt Dick Claiborne's resentment of his presence on board. He knew perfectly well that his acquaintance with the Claibornes was too slight to be severely strained, particularly where a fellow of Dick Claiborne's high spirit was concerned. He talked with them a few minutes longer, then took himself off; and they saw little of him the rest of the day.

Armitage did not share their distinction of a seat at the captain's table, and Dick found him late at night in the smoking-saloon with pipe and book. Armitage nodded and asked him to sit down.

"You are a sailor as well as a soldier, Captain. You

are fortunate; I always sit up the first night to make sure the enemy doesn't lay hold of me in my sleep."

He tossed his book aside, had brandy and soda brought and offered Claiborne a cigar.

"This is not the most fortunate season for crossing; I am sure to fall to-morrow. My father and mother hate the sea particularly and have retired for three days. My sister is the only one of us who is perfectly immune."

"Yes; I can well image Miss Claiborne in the good graces of the elements," replied Armitage; and they were silent for several minutes while a big Russian, who was talking politics in a distant corner with a very small and solemn German, boomed out his views on the Eastern question in a tremendous bass.

Dick Claiborne was a good deal amused at finding himself sitting beside Armitage,—enjoying, indeed, his fellow traveler's hospitality; but Armitage, he was forced to admit, bore all the marks of a gentleman. He had, to be sure, followed Shirley about, but even the young man's manner in this was hardly a matter at which he could cavil. And there was something altogether likable in Armitage; his very composure was attractive to Claiborne; and the bold lines of his figure were not wasted on the young officer. In the silence, while they smoked,

he noted the perfect taste that marked Armitage's belongings, which to him meant more, perhaps, than the steadiness of the man's eyes or the fine lines of his face. Unconsciously Claiborne found himself watching Armitage's strong ringless hands, and he knew that such a hand, well kept though it appeared, had known hard work, and that the long supple fingers were such as might guide a tiller fearlessly or set a flag daringly upon a fire-swept parapet.

Armitage was thinking rapidly of something he had suddenly resolved to say to Captain Claiborne. He knew that the Claibornes were a family of distinction; the father was an American diplomat and lawyer of wide reputation; the family stood for the best of which America is capable, and they were homeward bound to the American capital where their social position and the father's fame made them conspicuous.

Armitage put down his cigar and bent toward Claiborne, speaking with quiet directness.

"Captain Claiborne, I was introduced to you at Geneva by Mr. Singleton. You may have observed me several times previously at Venice, Rome, Florence, Paris, Berlin. I certainly saw you! I shall not deny that I intentionally followed you, nor"—John Armitage smiled,

then grew grave again—"can I make any adequate apology for doing so."

Claiborne looked at Armitage wonderingly. The man's attitude and tone were wholly serious and compelled respect. Claiborne nodded and threw away his cigar that he might give his whole attention to what Armitage might have to say.

"A man does not like to have his sister forming the acquaintances of persons who are not properly vouched for. Except for Singleton you know nothing of me; and Singleton knows very little of me, indeed."

Claiborne nodded. He felt the color creeping into his cheeks consciously as Armitage touched upon this matter.

"I speak to you as I do because it is your right to know who and what I am, for I am not on the *King Edward* by accident but by intention, and I am going to Washington because your sister lives there."

Claiborne smiled in spite of himself.

"But, my dear sir, this is most extraordinary! I don't know that I care to hear any more; by listening I seem to be encouraging you to follow us—it's altogether too unusual. It's almost preposterous!"

And Dick Claiborne frowned severely; but Armitage still met his eyes gravely.

"It's only decent for a man to give his references when it's natural for them to be required. I was educated at Trinity College, Toronto. I spent a year at the Harvard Law School. And I am not a beggar utterly. I own a ranch in Montana that actually pays and a thousand acres of the best wheat land in Nebraska. At the Bronx Loan and Trust Company in New York I have securities to a considerable amount,—I am perfectly willing that any one who is at all interested should inquire of the Trust Company officers as to my standing with them. If I were asked to state my occupation I should have to say that I am a cattle herder—what you call a cowboy. I can make my living in the practice of the business almost anywhere from New Mexico north to the Canadian line. I flatter myself that I am pretty good at it," and John Armitage smiled and took a cigarette from a box on the table and lighted it.

Dick Claiborne was greatly interested in what Armitage had said, and he struggled between an inclination to encourage further confidence and a feeling that he should, for Shirley's sake, make it clear to this young stranger that it was of no consequence to any member of the Claiborne family who he was or what might be the extent of his lands or the unimpeachable character

of his investments. But it was not so easy to turn aside a fellow who was so big of frame and apparently so sane and so steady of purpose as this Armitage. And there was, too, the further consideration that while Armitage was volunteering gratuitous information, and assuming an interest in his affairs by the Claibornes that was wholly unjustified, there was also the other side of the matter: that his explanations proceeded from motives of delicacy that were praiseworthy. Dick was puzzled, and piqued besides, to find that his resources as a big protecting brother were so soon exhausted. What Armitage was asking was the right to seek his sister Shirley's hand in marriage, and the thing was absurd. Moreover, who was John Armitage?

The question startled Claiborne into a realization of the fact that Armitage had volunteered considerable information without at all answering this question. Dick Claiborne was a human being, and curious.

"Pardon me," he asked, "but are you an Englishman?"

"I am not," answered Armitage. "I have been so long in America that I feel as much at home there as anywhere—but I am neither English nor American by birth; I am, on the other hand—"

He hesitated for the barest second, and Claiborne was sensible of an intensification of interest; now at last there was to be a revelation that amounted to something.

"On the other hand," Armitage repeated, "I was born at Fontainebleau, where my parents lived for only a few months; but I do not consider that that fact makes me a Frenchman. My mother is dead. My father died—very recently. I have been in America enough to know that a foreigner is often under suspicion—particularly if he have a title! My distinction is that I am a foreigner without one!" John Armitage laughed.

"It is, indeed, a real merit," declared Dick, who felt that something was expected of him. In spite of himself, he found much to like in John Armitage. He particularly despised sham and pretense, and he had been won by the evident sincerity of Armitage's wish to appear well in his eyes.

"And now," said Armitage, "I assure you that I am not in the habit of talking so much about myself—and if you will overlook this offense I promise not to bore you again."

"I have been interested," remarked Dick; "and," he added, "I can not do less than thank you, Mr. Armitage."

Armitage began talking of the American army—its strength and weaknesses—with an intimate knowledge that greatly surprised and interested the young officer; and when they separated presently it was with a curious mixture of liking and mystification that Claiborne reviewed their talk.

The next day brought heavy weather, and only hardened sea-goers were abroad. Armitage, breakfasting late, was not satisfied that he had acted wisely in speaking to Captain Claiborne; but he had, at any rate, eased in some degree his own conscience, and he had every intention of seeing all that he could of Shirley Claiborne during these days of their fellow-voyaging.

CHAPTER VII

ON THE DARK DECK

Ease, of all good gifts the best,
War and wave at last decree:
Love alone denies us rest,
Crueler than sword or sea.

William Watson.

"I am Columbus every time I cross," said Shirley. "What lies out there in the west is an undiscovered country."

"Then I shall have to take the part of the rebellious and doubting crew. There is no America, and we're sure to get into trouble if we don't turn back."

"You shall be clapped into irons and fed on bread and water, and turned over to the Indians as soon as we reach land."

"Don't starve me! Let me hang from the yard-arm at once, or walk the plank. I choose the hour immediately after dinner for my obsequies!"

"Choose a cheerfuller word!" pleaded Shirley.

"I am sorry to suggest mortality, but I was trying to