

"Then lesser affairs, such as picking up trinkets—"

"Come naturally—quite so!" and Chauvenet twisted his mustache with an air of immense satisfaction.

"But the genial art of assassination—there's a business that requires a calculating hand, my dear Monsieur Chauvenet!"

Chauvenet's hand went again to his lip.

"To be sure!" he ejaculated with zest.

"But alone—alone one can do little. For larger operations one requires—I should say—courageous associates. Now in my affairs—would you believe me?—I am obliged to manage quite alone."

"How melancholy!" exclaimed Chauvenet.

"It is indeed very sad!" and Armitage sighed, tossed his cigarette into the smoldering grate and bade Chauvenet a ceremonious good night.

"Ah, we shall meet again, I dare say!"

"The thought does credit to a generous nature!" responded Armitage, and passed out into the house.

CHAPTER IX

"THIS IS AMERICA, MR. ARMITAGE"

Lo! as I came to the crest of the hill, the sun on the heights
had arisen,
The dew on the grass was shining, and white was the mist
on the vale;
Like a lark on the wing of the dawn I sang; like a guiltless
one freed from his prison,
As backward I gazed through the valley, and saw no one on
my trail.

—L. Frank Tooker.

Spring, planting green and gold banners on old Virginia battle-fields, crossed the Potomac and occupied Washington.

Shirley Claiborne called for her horse and rode forth to greet the conqueror. The afternoon was keen and sunny, and she had turned impatiently from a tea, to which she was committed, to seek the open. The call of the outdoor gods sang in her blood. Daffodils and crocuses lifted yellow flames and ruddy torches from every dooryard. She had pinned a spray of arbutus to the lapel of her tan riding-coat; it spoke to her of the

blue horizons of the near Virginia hills. The young buds in the maples hovered like a mist in the tree-tops. Towering over all, the incomparable gray obelisk climbed to the blue arch and brought it nearer earth. Washington, the center of man's hope, is also, in spring, the capital of the land of heart's desire.

With a groom trailing after her, Shirley rode toward Rock Creek,—that rippling, murmuring, singing trifle of water that laughs day and night at the margin of the beautiful city, as though politics and statesmanship were the hugest joke in the world. The flag on the Austro-Hungarian embassy hung at half-mast and symbols of mourning fluttered from the entire front of the house. Shirley lifted her eyes gravely as she passed. Her thoughts flew at once to the scene at the house of the Secretary of State a week before, when Baron von Marhof had learned of the death of his sovereign; and by association she thought, too, of Armitage, and of his look and voice as he said:

"Long live the Emperor and King! God save Austria!"

Emperors and kings! They were as impossible today as a snowstorm. The grave ambassadors as they appeared at great Washington functions, wearing their

decorations, always struck her as being particularly distinguished. It just now occurred to her that they were all linked to the crown and scepter; but she dismissed the whole matter and bowed to two dark ladies in a passing victoria with the quick little nod and bright smile that were the same for these titled members of the Spanish Ambassador's household as for the young daughters of a western senator, who democratically waved their hands to her from a doorstep.

Armitage came again to her mind. He had called at the Claiborne house twice since the Secretary's ball, and she had been surprised to find how fully she accepted him as an American, now that he was on her own soil. He derived, too, a certain stability from the fact that the Sandersons knew him; he was, indeed, an entirely different person since the Montana Senator definitely connected him with an American landscape. She had kept her own counsel touching the scene on the dark deck of the *King Edward*, but it was not a thing lightly to be forgotten. She was half angry with herself this mellow afternoon to find how persistently Armitage came into her thoughts, and how the knife-thrust on the steamer deck kept recurring in her mind and quickening her sympathy for a man of whom she knew

so little; and she touched her horse impatiently with the crop and rode into the park at a gait that roused the groom to attention.

At a bend of the road Chauvenet and Franzel, the attaché, swung into view, mounted, and as they met, Chauvenet turned his horse and rode beside her.

"Ah, these American airs! This spring! Is it not good to be alive, Miss Claiborne?"

"It is all of that!" she replied. It seemed to her that the day had not needed Chauvenet's praise.

"I had hoped to see you later at the Wallingford tea!" he continued.

"No teas for me on a day like this! The thought of being indoors is tragic!"

She wished that he would leave her, for she had ridden out into the spring sunshine to be alone. He somehow did not appear to advantage in his riding-coat,—his belongings were too perfect. She had really enjoyed his talk when they had met here and there abroad; but she was in no mood for him now; and she wondered what he had lost by the transfer to America. He ran on airily in French, speaking of the rush of great and small social affairs that marked the end of the season.

"Poor Franzel is indeed *triste*. He is taking the death of Johann Wilhelm quite hard. But here in America the death of an emperor seems less important. A king or a peasant, what does it matter!"

"Better ask the robin in yonder budding chestnut tree, Monsieur. This is not an hour for hard questions!"

"Ah, you are very cruel! You drive me back to poor, melancholy Franzel, who is indeed a funeral in himself."

"That is very sad, Monsieur,"—and she smiled at him with mischief in her eyes. "My heart goes out to any one who is left to mourn—alone."

He gathered his reins and drew up his horse, lifting his hat with a perfect gesture.

"There are sadder blows than losing one's sovereign, Mademoiselle!" and he shook his bared head mournfully and rode back to find his friend.

She sought now her favorite bridle-paths and her heart was light with the sweetness and peace of the spring as she heard the rush and splash of the creek, saw the flash of wings and felt the mystery of awakened life throbbing about her. The heart of a girl in spring is the home of dreams, and Shirley's heart overflowed

with them, until her pulse thrilled and sang in quickening cadences. The wistfulness of April, the dream of unfathomable things, shone in her brown eyes; and a girl with dreams in her eyes is the divinest work of the gods. Into this twentieth century, into the iron heart of cities, she still comes, and the clear, high stars of April nights and the pensive moon of September are glad because of her.

The groom marveled at the sudden changes of gait, the gallops that fell abruptly to a walk with the alterations of mood in the girl's heart, the pauses that marked a moment of meditation as she watched some green curving bank, or a plunge of the mad little creek that sent a glory of spray whitely into the sunlight. It grew late and the shadows of waning afternoon crept through the park. The crowd had hurried home to escape the chill of the spring dusk, but she lingered on, reluctant to leave, and presently left her horse with the groom that she might walk alone beside the creek in a place that was beautifully wild. About her lay a narrow strip of young maples and beyond this the wide park road wound at the foot of a steep wooded cliff. The place was perfectly quiet save for the splash and babble of the creek.

Several minutes passed. Once she heard her groom speak to the horses, though she could not see him, but the charm of the place held her. She raised her eyes from the tumbling water before her and looked off through the maple tangle. Then she drew back quickly, and clasped her riding-crop tightly. Some one had paused at the farther edge of the maple brake and dismounted, as she had, for a more intimate enjoyment of the place. It was John Armitage, tapping his riding-boot idly with his crop as he leaned against a tree and viewed the miniature valley.

He was a little below her, so that she saw him quite distinctly, and caught a glimpse of his horse pawing, with arched neck, in the bridle-path behind him. She had no wish to meet him there and turned to steal back to her horse when a movement in the maples below caught her eye. She paused, fascinated and alarmed by the cautious stir of the undergrowth. The air was perfectly quiet; the disturbance was not caused by the wind. Then the head and shoulders of a man were disclosed as he crouched on hands and knees, watching Armitage. His small head and big body as he crept forward suggested to Shirley some fantastic monster of legend, and her heart beat fast with terror as a knife

flashed in his hand. He moved more rapidly toward the silent figure by the tree, and still Shirley watched wide-eyed, her figure tense and trembling, the hand that held the crop half raised to her lips, while the dark form rose and poised for a spring.

Then she cried out, her voice ringing clear and high across the little vale and sounding back from the cliff.

"Oh! Oh!" and Armitage leaped forward and turned. His crop fell first upon the raised hand, knocking the knife far into the trees, then upon the face and shoulders of the Servian. The fellow turned and fled through the maple tangle, Armitage after him, and Shirley ran back toward the bridge where she had left her groom and met him half-way hurrying toward her.

"What is it, Miss? Did you call?"

"No; it was nothing, Thomas—nothing at all," and she mounted and turned toward home.

Her heart was still pounding with excitement and she walked her horse to gain composure. Twice, in circumstances most unusual and disquieting, she had witnessed an attack on John Armitage by an unknown enemy. She recalled now a certain pathos of his figure as she first saw him leaning against the tree watching the turbulent little stream, and she was impatient to

find how her sympathy went out to him. It made no difference who John Armitage was; his enemy was a coward, and the horror of such a menace to a man's life appalled her. She passed a mounted policeman, who recognized her and raised his hand in salute, but the idea of reporting the strange affair in the strip of woodland occurred to her only to be dismissed. She felt that here was an ugly business that was not within the grasp of a park patrolman, and, moreover, John Armitage was entitled to pursue his own course in matters that touched his life so closely. The thought of him reassured her; he was no simple boy to suffer such attacks to pass unchallenged; and so, dismissing him, she raised her head and saw him gallop forth from a by-path and rein his horse beside her.

"Miss Claiborne!"

The suppressed feeling in his tone made the moment tense and she saw that his lips trembled. It was a situation that must have its quick relief, so she said instantly, in a mockery of his own tone:

"Mr. Armitage!" She laughed. "I am almost caught in the dark. The blandishments of spring have beguiled me."

He looked at her with a quick scrutiny. It did not

seem possible that this could be the girl who had called to him in warning scarce five minutes before; but he knew it had been she,—he would have known her voice anywhere in the world. They rode silent beside the creek, which was like a laughing companion seeking to mock them into a cheerier mood. At an opening through the hills they saw the western horizon aglow in tints of lemon deepening into gold and purple. Save for the riot of the brook the world was at peace. She met his eyes for an instant, and their gravity, and the firm lines in which his lips were set, showed that the shock of his encounter had not yet passed.

"You must think me a strange person, Miss Claiborne. It seems inexplicable that a man's life should be so menaced in a place like this. If you had not called to me—"

"Please don't speak of that! It was so terrible!"

"But I must speak of it! Once before the same attempt was made—that night on the *King Edward*."

"Yes; I have not forgotten."

"And to-day I have reason to believe that the same man watched his chance, for I have ridden here every day since I came, and he must have kept track of me."

"But this is America, Mr. Armitage!"

"That does not help me with you. You have every reason to resent my bringing you into such dangers,—it is unpardonable—indefensible!"

She saw that he was greatly troubled.

"But you couldn't help my being in the park to-day! I have often stopped just there before. It's a favorite place for meditations. If you know the man—"

"I know the man."

"Then the law will certainly protect you, as you know very well. He was a dreadful-looking person. The police can undoubtedly find and lock him up."

She was seeking to minimize the matter,—to pass it off as a commonplace affair of every day. They were walking their horses; the groom followed stolidly behind.

Armitage was silent, a look of great perplexity on his face. When he spoke he was quite calm.

"Miss Claiborne, I must tell you that this is an affair in which I can't ask help in the usual channels. You will pardon me if I seem to make a mystery of what should be ordinarily a bit of business between myself and the police; but to give publicity to these attempts to injure me just now would be a mistake. I could have caught that man there in the wood; but I let him go,

for the reason—for the reason that I want the men back of him to show themselves before I act. But if it isn't presuming—"

He was quite himself again. His voice was steady and deep with the ease and assurance that she liked in him. She had marked to-day in his earnestness, more than at any other time, a slight, an almost indistinguishable trace of another tongue in his English.

"How am I to know whether it would be presuming?" she asked.

"But I was going to say—"

"When rudely interrupted!" She was trying to make it easy for him to say whatever he wished.

"—that these troubles of mine are really personal. I have committed no crime and am not fleeing from justice."

She laughed and urged her horse into a gallop for a last stretch of road near the park limits.

"How uninteresting! We expect a Montana ranchman to have a spectacular past."

"But not to carry it, I hope, to Washington. On the range I might become a lawless bandit in the interest of picturesqueness; but here—"

"Here in the world of frock-coated statesmen nothing really interesting is to be expected."

She walked her horse again. It occurred to her that he might wish an assurance of silence from her. What she had seen would make a capital bit of gossip, to say nothing of being material for the newspapers, and her conscience, as she reflected, grew uneasy at the thought of shielding him. She knew that her father and mother, and, even more strictly, her brother, would close their doors on a man whose enemies followed him over seas and lay in wait for him in a peaceful park; but here she tested him. A man of breeding would not ask protection of a woman on whom he had no claim, and it was certainly not for her to establish an understanding with him in so strange and grave a matter.

"It must be fun having a ranch with cattle on a thousand hills. I always wished my father would go in for a western place, but he can't travel so far from home. Our ranch is in Virginia."

"You have a Virginia farm? That is very interesting."

"Yes; at Storm Springs. It's really beautiful down there," she said simply.

It was on his tongue to tell her that he, too, owned a

bit of Virginia soil, but he had just established himself as a Montana ranchman, and it seemed best not to multiply his places of residence. He had, moreover, forgotten the name of the county in which his preserve lay. He said, with truth:

"I know nothing of Virginia or the South; but I have viewed the landscape from Arlington and some day I hope to go adventuring in the Virginia hills."

"Then you should not overlook our valley. I am sure there must be adventures waiting for somebody down there. You can tell our place by the spring lamb on the hillside. There's a huge inn that offers the long-distance telephone and market reports and golf links and very good horses, and lots of people stop there as a matter of course in their flight between Florida and Newport. They go up and down the coast like the mercury in a thermometer—up when it's warm, down when it's cold. There's the secret of our mercurial temperament."

A passing automobile frightened her horse, and he watched her perfect coolness in quieting the animal with rein and voice.

"He's just up from the farm and doesn't like town

very much. But he shall go home again soon," she said as they rode on.

"Oh, you go down to shepherd those spring lambs!" he exclaimed, with misgiving in his heart. He had followed her across the sea and now she was about to take flight again!

"Yes; and to escape from the tiresome business of trying to remember people's names."

"Then you reverse the usual fashionable process—you go south to meet the rising mercury."

"I hadn't thought of it, but that is so. I dearly love a hillside, with pines and cedars, and sloping meadows with sheep—and rides over mountain roads to the gate of dreams, where Spottswood's golden horseshoe knights ride out at you with a grand sweep of their plumed hats. Now what have you to say to that?"

"Nothing, but my entire approval," he said.

He dimly understood, as he left her in this gay mood, at the Claiborne house, that she had sought to make him forget the lurking figure in the park thicket and the dark deed thwarted there. It was her way of conveying to him her dismissal of the incident, and it implied a greater kindness than any pledge of secrecy. He rode away with grave eyes, and a new hope filled his heart.