

CHAPTER X

JOHN ARMITAGE IS SHADOWED

Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.
—Walt Whitman.

Armitage dined alone that evening and left the hotel at nine o'clock for a walk. He unaffectedly enjoyed paved ground and the sights and ways of cities, and he walked aimlessly about the lighted thoroughfares of the capital with conscious pleasure in the movement and color of life. He let his eyes follow the Washington Monument's gray line starward; and he stopped to enjoy the high-poised equestrian statue of Sherman, to which the starry dusk gave something of legendary and Old World charm.

Coming out upon Pennsylvania Avenue he strolled past the White House, and, at the wide-flung gates, paused while a carriage swept by him at the driveway. He saw within the grim face of Baron von Marhof and

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unconsciously lifted his hat, though the Ambassador was deep in thought and did not see him. Armitage struck the pavement smartly with his stick as he walked slowly on, pondering; but he was conscious a moment later that some one was loitering persistently in his wake. Armitage was at once on the alert with all his faculties sharpened. He turned and gradually slackened his pace, and the person behind him immediately did likewise.

The sensation of being followed is at first annoying; then a pleasant zest creeps into it, and in Armitage's case the reaction was immediate. He was even amused to reflect that the shadow had chosen for his exploit what is probably the most conspicuous and the best-guarded spot in America. It was not yet ten o'clock, but the streets were comparatively free of people. He slackened his pace gradually, and threw open his overcoat, for the night was warm, to give an impression of ease, and when he had reached the somber façade of the Treasury Building he paused and studied it in the glare of the electric lights, as though he were a chance traveler taking a preliminary view of the sights of the capital. A man still lingered behind him, drawing nearer now, at a moment when they had the sidewalk comparatively free to themselves. The fellow was short,

but of soldierly erectness, and even in his loitering pace lifted his feet with the quick precision of the drilled man. Armitage walked to the corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and Fifteenth Street, then turned and retraced his steps slowly past the Treasury Building. The man who had been following faced about and walked slowly in the opposite direction, and Armitage, quickening his own pace, amused himself by dogging the fellow's steps closely for twenty yards, then passed him.

When he had gained the advantage of a few feet, Armitage stopped suddenly and spoke to the man in the casual tone he might have used in addressing a passing acquaintance.

"My friend," he said, "there are two policemen across the street; if you continue to follow me I shall call their attention to you."

"Pardon me—"

"You are watching me; and the thing won't do."

"Yes, I'm watching you; but—"

"But the thing won't do! If you are hired—"

"*Nein! Nein!* You do me a wrong, sir."

"Then if you are not hired you are your own master, and you serve yourself ill when you take the trouble to follow me. Now I'm going to finish my walk, and I beg

you to keep out of my way. This is not a place where liberties may be infringed with impunity. Good evening, sir."

Armitage wheeled about sharply, and as his face came into the full light of the street lamps the stranger stared at him intently.

Armitage was fumbling in his pocket for a coin, but this impertinence caused him to change his mind. Two policemen were walking slowly toward them, and Armitage, annoyed by the whole incident, walked quickly away.

He was not wholly at ease over the meeting. The fact that Chauvenet had so promptly put a spy as well as the Servian assassin on his trail quickened his pulse with anger for an instant and then sobered him.

He continued his walk, and paused presently before an array of books in a shop window. Then some one stopped at his side and he looked up to find the same man he had accosted at the Treasury Building lifting his hat,—an American soldier's campaign hat. The fellow was an extreme blond, with a smooth-shaven, weather-beaten face, blue eyes and light hair.

"Pardon me! You are mistaken; I am not a spy. But it is wonderful; it is quite wonderful—"

The man's face was alight with discovery, with an alert pleasure that awaited recognition.

"My dear fellow, you really become annoying," and Armitage again thrust his hand into his trousers pocket. "I should hate awfully to appeal to the police; but you must not crowd me too far."

The man seemed moved by deep feeling, and his eyes were bright with excitement. His hands clasped tightly the railing that protected the glass window of the book shop. As Armitage turned away impatiently the man ejaculated huskily, as though some over-mastering influence wrung the words from him:

"Don't you know me? I am Oscar—don't you remember me, and the great forest, where I taught you to shoot and fish? You are—"

He bent toward Armitage with a fierce insistence, his eyes blazing in his eagerness to be understood.

John Armitage turned again to the window, leaned lightly upon the iron railing and studied the title of a book attentively. He was silently absorbed for a full minute, in which the man who had followed him waited. Taking his cue from Armitage's manner he appeared to be deeply interested in the bookseller's display; but the excitement still glittered in his eyes.

Armitage was thinking swiftly, and his thoughts covered a very wide range of time and place as he stood there. Then he spoke very deliberately and coolly, but with a certain peremptory sharpness.

"Go ahead of me to the New American and wait in the office until I come."

The man's hand went to his hat.

"None of that!"

Armitage arrested him with a gesture. "My name is Armitage,—John Armitage," he said. "I advise you to remember it. Now go!"

The man hurried away, and Armitage slowly followed.

It occurred to him that the man might be of use, and with this in mind he returned to the New American, got his key from the office, nodded to his acquaintance of the street and led the way to the elevator.

Armitage put aside his coat and hat, locked the hall door, and then, when the two stood face to face in his little sitting-room, he surveyed the man carefully.

"What do you want?" he demanded bluntly.

He took a cigarette from a box on the table, lighted it, and then, with an air of finality, fixed his gaze upon the man, who eyed him with a kind of stupefied won-

der. Then there flashed into the fellow's bronzed face something of dignity and resentment. He stood perfectly erect with his felt hat clasped in his hand. His clothes were cheap, but clean, and his short coat was buttoned trimly about him.

"I want nothing, Mr. Armitage," he replied humbly, speaking slowly and with a marked German accent.

"Then you will be easily satisfied," said Armitage. "You said your name was—?"

"Oscar—Oscar Breunig."

Armitage sat down and scrutinized the man again without relaxing his severity.

"You think you have seen me somewhere, so you have followed me in the streets to make sure. When did this idea first occur to you?"

"I saw you at Fort Myer at the drill last Friday. I have been looking for you since, and saw you leave your horse at the hotel this afternoon. You ride at Rock Creek—yes?"

"What do you do for a living, Mr. Breunig?" asked Armitage.

"I was in the army, but served out my time and was discharged a few months ago and came to Washington to see where they make the government—yes? I am

going to South America. Is it Peru? Yes; there will be a revolution."

He paused, and Armitage met his eyes; they were very blue and kind,—eyes that spoke of sincerity and fidelity, such eyes as a leader of forlorn hopes would like to know were behind him when he gave the order to charge. Then a curious thing happened. It may have been the contact of eye with eye that awoke question and response between them; it may have been a need in one that touched a chord of helplessness in the other; but suddenly Armitage leaped to his feet and grasped the outstretched hands of the little soldier.

"Oscar!" he said; and repeated, very softly, "Oscar!"

The man was deeply moved and the tears sprang into his eyes. Armitage laughed, holding him at arm's length.

"None of that nonsense! Sit down!" He turned to the door, opened it, and peered into the hall, locked the door again, then motioned the man to a chair.

"So you deserted your mother country, did you, and have borne arms for the glorious republic?"

"I served in the Philippines,—yes?"

"Rank, titles, emoluments, Oscar?"

"I was a sergeant; and the surgeon could not find the bullet after Big Bend, Luzon; so they were sorry and gave me a certificate and two dollars a month to my pay," said the man, so succinctly and colorlessly that Armitage laughed.

"You have done well, Oscar; honor me by accepting a cigar."

The man took a cigar from the box which Armitage extended, but would not light it. He held it rather absent-mindedly in his hand and continued to stare.

"You are not dead,—Mr.—Armitage; but your father—?"

"My father is dead, Oscar."

"He was a good man," said the soldier.

"Yes; he was a good man," repeated Armitage gravely. "I am alive, and yet I am dead, Oscar; do you grasp the idea? You were a good friend when we were lads together in the great forest. If I should want you to help me now—"

The man jumped to his feet and stood at attention so gravely that Armitage laughed and slapped his knee.

"You are well taught, Sergeant Oscar! Sit down. I am going to trust you. My affairs just now are not without their trifling dangers."

"There are enemies—yes?" and Oscar nodded his head solemnly in acceptance of the situation.

"I am going to trust you absolutely. You have no confidants—you are not married?"

"How should a man be married who is a soldier? I have no friends; they are unprofitable," declared Oscar solemnly.

"I fear you are a pessimist, Oscar; but a pessimist who keeps his mouth shut is a good ally. Now, if you are not afraid of being shot or struck with a knife, and if you are willing to obey my orders for a few weeks we may be able to do some business. First, remember that I am Mr. Armitage; you must learn that now, and remember it for all time. And if any one should ever suggest anything else—"

The man nodded his comprehension.

"That will be the time for Oscar to be dumb. I understand, Mr. Armitage."

Armitage smiled. The man presented so vigorous a picture of health, his simple character was so transparently reflected in his eyes and face that he did not in the least question him.

"You are an intelligent person, Sergeant. If you are

equally discreet—able to be deaf when troublesome questions are asked, then I think we shall get on.”

“You should remember—” began Oscar.

“I remember nothing,” observed Armitage sharply; and Oscar was quite humble again. Armitage opened a trunk and took out an envelope from which he drew several papers and a small map, which he unfolded and spread on the table. He marked a spot with his lead-pencil and passed the map to Oscar.

“Do you think you could find that place?”

The man breathed hard over it for several minutes.

“Yes; it would be easy,” and he nodded his head several times as he named the railroad stations nearest the point indicated by Armitage. The place was in one of the mountainous counties of Virginia, fifteen miles from an east and west railway line. Armitage opened a duly recorded deed which conveyed to himself the title to two thousand acres of land; also a curiously complicated abstract of title showing the successive transfers of ownership from colonial days down through the years of Virginia’s splendor to the dread time when battle shook the world. The title had passed from the receiver of a defunct shooting-club to Armitage, who had been charmed by the description of the property as set forth

in an advertisement, and lured, moreover, by the amazingly small price at which the preserve was offered.

“It is a farm—yes?”

“It is a wilderness, I fancy,” said Armitage. “I have never seen it; I may never see it, for that matter; but you will find your way there—going first to this town, Lamar, studying the country, keeping your mouth shut, and seeing what the improvements on the ground amount to. There’s some sort of a bungalow there, built by the shooting-club. Here’s a description of the place, on the strength of which I bought it. You may take these papers along to judge the size of the swindle.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And a couple of good horses; plenty of commissary stores—plain military necessities, you understand—and some bedding should be provided. I want you to take full charge of this matter and get to work as quickly as possible. It may be a trifle lonesome down there among the hills, but if you serve me well you shall not regret it.”

“Yes, I am quite satisfied with the job,” said Oscar.

“And after you have reached the place and settled yourself you will tell the postmaster and telegraph operator who you are and where you may be found, so that

messages may reach you promptly. If you get an unsigned message advising you of—let me consider—a shipment of steers, you may expect me any hour. On the other hand, you may not see me at all. We'll consider that our agreement lasts until the first snow flies next winter. You are a soldier. There need be no further discussion of this matter, Oscar."

The man nodded gravely.

"And it is well for you not to reappear in this hotel. If you should be questioned on leaving here—"

"I have not been here—is it not?"

"It is," replied Armitage, smiling. "You read and write English?"

"Yes; one must, to serve in the army."

"If you should see a big Servian with a neck like a bull and a head the size of a pea, who speaks very bad German, you will do well to keep out of his way,—unless you find a good place to tie him up. I advise you not to commit murder without special orders,—do you understand?"

"It is the custom of the country," assented Oscar, in a tone of deep regret.

"To be sure," laughed Armitage; "and now I am go-

ing to give you money enough to carry out the project I have indicated."

He took from his trunk a long bill-book, counted out twenty new one-hundred-dollar bills and threw them on the table.

"It is much money," observed Oscar, counting the bills laboriously.

"It will be enough for your purposes. You can't spend much money up there if you try. Bacon—perhaps eggs; a cow may be necessary,—who can tell without trying it? Don't write me any letters or telegrams, and forget that you have seen me if you don't hear from me again."

He went to the elevator and rode down to the office with Oscar and dismissed him carelessly. Then John Armitage bought an armful of magazines and newspapers and returned to his room, quite like any traveler taking the comforts of his inn.