

CHAPTER XIII

THE LADY OF THE PERGOLA

April, April,
Laugh thy girlish laughter;
Then, the moment after,
Weep thy girlish tears!
April, that mine ears
Like a lover greetest,
If I tell thee, sweetest,
All my hopes and fears,
April, April,
Laugh thy golden laughter,
But, the moment after,
Weep thy golden tears!

—*William Watson.*

A few photographs of foreign scenes tacked on the walls; a Roman blanket hung as a tapestry over the mantel; a portfolio and traveler's writing materials distributed about a table produced for the purpose, and additions to the meager book-shelf—a line of Baedekers, a pocket atlas, a comprehensive American railway guide, several volumes of German and French poetry—and the place was not so bad. Armitage slept for an hour after

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a simple luncheon had been prepared by Oscar, studied his letters and cablegrams—made, in fact, some notes in regard to them—and wrote replies. Then, at four o'clock, he told Oscar to saddle the horses.

"It is spring, and in April a man's blood will not be quiet. We shall go forth and taste the air."

He had studied the map of Lamar County with care, and led the way out of his own preserve by the road over which they had entered in the morning. Oscar and his horses were a credit to the training of the American army, and would have passed inspection anywhere. Armitage watched his adjutant with approval. The man served without question, and, quicker of wit than of speech, his buff-gauntleted hand went to his hat-brim whenever Armitage addressed him.

They sought again the spot whence Armitage had first looked down upon Storm Valley, and he opened his pocket map, the better to clarify his ideas of the region.

"We shall go down into the valley, Oscar," he said; and thereafter it was he that led.

They struck presently into an old road that had been an early highway across the mountains. Above and below the forest hung gloomily, and passing clouds darkened the slopes and occasionally spilled rain. Armitage

drew on his cloak and Oscar enveloped himself in a slicker as they rode through a sharp shower. At a lower level they came into fair weather again, and, crossing a bridge, rode down into Storm Valley. The road at once bore marks of care; and they passed a number of traps that spoke unmistakably of cities, and riders whose mounts knew well the bridle-paths of Central Park. The hotel loomed massively before them, and beyond were handsome estates and ambitious mansions scattered through the valley and on the lower slopes.

Armitage paused in a clump of trees and dismounted.

"You will stay here until I come back. And remember that we don't know any one; and at our time of life, Oscar, one should be wary of making new acquaintances."

He tossed his cloak over the saddle and walked toward the inn. The size of the place and the great number of people going and coming surprised him, but in the numbers he saw his own security, and he walked boldly up the steps of the main hotel entrance. He stepped into the long corridor of the inn, where many people lounged about, and heard with keen satisfaction and relief the click of a telegraph instrument that seemed at once to bring him into contact with the remote world. He

filed his telegrams and walked the length of the broad hall, his riding-crop under his arm. The gay banter and laughter of a group of young men and women just returned from a drive gave him a touch of heartache, for there was a girl somewhere in the valley whom he had followed across the sea, and these people were of her own world—they undoubtedly knew her; very likely she came often to this huge caravansary and mingled with them.

At the entrance he passed Baron von Marhof, who, by reason of the death of his royal chief, had taken a cottage at the Springs to emphasize his abstention from the life of the capital. The Ambassador lifted his eyes and bowed to Armitage, as he bowed to a great many young men whose names he never remembered; but, oddly enough, the Baron paused, stared after Armitage for a moment, then shook his head and walked on with knit brows. Armitage had lifted his hat and passed out, tapping his leg with his crop.

He walked toward the private houses that lay scattered over the valley and along the gradual slope of the hills as though carelessly flung from a dice box. Many of the places were handsome estates, with imposing houses set amid beautiful gardens. Half a mile from

the hotel he stopped a passing negro to ask who owned a large house that stood well back from the road. The man answered; he seemed anxious to impart further information, and Armitage availed himself of the opportunity.

"How near is Judge Claiborne's place?" he asked.

The man pointed. It was the next house, on the right-hand side; and Armitage smiled to himself and strolled on.

He looked down in a moment upon a pretty estate, distinguished by its formal garden, but with the broad acres of a practical farm stretching far out into the valley. The lawn terraces were green, broken only by plots of spring flowers; the walks were walled in box and privet; the house, of the pillared colonial type, crowned a series of terraces. A long pergola, with pillars topped by red urns, curved gradually through the garden toward the mansion. Armitage followed a side road along the brick partition wall and contemplated the inner landscape. The sharp snap of a gardener's shears far up the slope was the only sound that reached him. It was a charming place, and he yielded to a temptation to explore it. He dropped over the wall and strolled away through the garden, the smell of warm earth, moist from

the day's light showers, and the faint odor of green things growing, sweet in his nostrils. He walked to the far end of the pergola, sat down on a wooden bench, and gave himself up to reverie. He had been denounced as an impostor; he was on Claiborne soil; and the situation required thought.

It was while he thus pondered his affairs that Shirley, walking over the soft lawn from a neighboring estate, came suddenly upon him.

Her head went up with surprise and—he was sure—with disdain. She stopped abruptly as he jumped to his feet.

"I am caught—*in flagrante delicto!* I can only plead guilty and pray for mercy."

"They said—they said you had gone to Mexico?" said Shirley questioningly.

"Plague take the newspapers! How dare they so misrepresent me!" he laughed.

"Yes, I read those newspaper articles with a good deal of interest. And my brother—"

"Yes, your brother—he is the best fellow in the world!"

She mused, but a smile of real mirth now played over her face and lighted her eyes.

"Those are generous words, Mr. Armitage. My brother warned me against you in quite unequivocal language. He told me about your match-box—"

"Oh, the cigarette case!" and he held it up. "It's really mine—and I'm going to keep it. It was very damaging evidence. It would argue strongly against me in any court of law."

"Yes, I believe that is true." And she looked at the trinket with frank interest.

"But I particularly do not wish to have to meet that charge in any court of law, Miss Claiborne."

She met his gaze very steadily, and her eyes were grave. Then she asked, in much the same tone that she would have used if they had been very old friends and he had excused himself for not riding that day, or for not going upon a hunt, or to the theater:

"Why?"

"Because I have a pledge to keep and a work to do, and if I were forced to defend myself from the charge of being the false Baron von Kissel, everything would be spoiled. You see, unfortunately—most unfortunately—I am not quite without responsibilities, and I have come down into the mountains, where I hope not to be shot and tossed over a precipice until I have had time

to watch certain people and certain events a little while. I tried to say as much to Captain Claiborne, but I saw that my story did not impress him. And now I have said the same thing to you—"

He waited, gravely watching her, hat in hand.

"And I have stood here and listened to you, and done exactly what Captain Claiborne would not wish me to do under any circumstances," said Shirley.

"You are infinitely kind and generous—"

"No. I do not wish you to think me either of those things—of course not!"

Her conclusion was abrupt and pointed.

"Then—"

"Then I will tell you—what I have not told any one else—that I know very well that you are not the person who appeared at Bar Harbor three years ago and palmed himself off as the Baron von Kissel."

"You know it—you are quite sure of it?" he asked blankly.

"Certainly. I saw that person—at Bar Harbor. I had gone up from Newport for a week—I was even at a tea where he was quite the lion, and I am sure you are not the same person."

Her direct manner of speech, her decisive tone, in

which she placed the matter of his identity on a purely practical and unsentimental plane, gave him a new impression of her character.

"But Captain Claiborne—"

He ceased suddenly and she anticipated the question at which he had faltered, and answered, a little icily:

"I do not consider it any of my business to meddle in your affairs with my brother. He undoubtedly believes you are the impostor who palmed himself off at Bar Harbor as the Baron von Kissel. He was told so—"

"By Monsieur Chauvenet."

"So he said."

"And of course he is a capital witness. There is no doubt of Chauvenet's entire credibility," declared Armitage, a little airily.

"I should say not," said Shirley unresponsively. "I am quite as sure that he was not the false baron as I am that you were not."

Armitage laughed.

"That is a little pointed."

"It was meant to be," said Shirley sternly. "It is"—she weighed the word—"ridiculous that both of you should be here."

"Thank you, for my half! I didn't know he was here!"

But I am not exactly *here*—I have a much safer place,"—he swept the blue-hilled horizon with his hand. "Monsieur Chauvenet and I will not shoot at each other in the hotel dining-room. But I am really relieved that he has come. We have an interesting fashion of running into each other; it would positively grieve me to be obliged to wait long for him."

He smiled and thrust his hat under his arm. The sun was dropping behind the great western barricade, and a chill wind crept sharply over the valley.

He started to walk beside her as she turned away, but she paused abruptly.

"Oh, this won't do at all! I can't be seen with you, even in the shadow of my own house. I must trouble you to take the side gate,"—and she indicated it by a nod of her head.

"Not if I know myself! I am not a fraudulent member of the German nobility—you have told me so yourself. Your conscience is clear—I assure you mine is equally so! And I am not a person, Miss Claiborne, to sneak out by side gates—particularly when I came over the fence! It's a long way around anyhow—and I have a horse over there somewhere by the inn."

"My brother—"

"Is at Fort Myer, of course. At about this hour they are having dress parade, and he is thoroughly occupied."

"But—there is Monsieur Chauvenet. He has nothing to do but amuse himself."

They had reached the veranda steps, and she ran to the top and turned for a moment to look at him. He still carried his hat and crop in one hand, and had dropped the other into the side pocket of his coat. He was wholly at ease, and the wind ruffled his hair and gave him a boyish look that Shirley liked. But she had no wish to be found with him, and she instantly nodded his dismissal and half turned away to go into the house, when he detained her for a moment.

"I am perfectly willing to afford Monsieur Chauvenet all imaginable entertainment. We are bound to have many meetings. I am afraid he reached this charming valley before me; but—as a rule—I prefer to be a little ahead of him; it's a whim—the merest whim, I assure you."

He laughed, thinking little of what he said, but delighting in the picture she made, the tall pillars of the veranda framing her against the white wall of the house, and the architrave high above speaking, so he thought, for the amplitude, the breadth of her nature. Her green



He delighted in the picture she made Page 190

cloth gown afforded the happiest possible contrast with the white background; and her hat—(for a gown, let us remember, may express the dressmaker, but a hat expresses the woman who wears it)—her hat, Armitage was aware, was a trifle of black velvet caught up at one side with snowy plumes well calculated to shock the sensibilities of the Audubon Society. Yet the bird, if he knew, doubtless rejoiced in his fate! Shirley's hand, thrice laid down, and there you have the length of that velvet cap, plume and all. Her profile, as she half turned away, must awaken regret that Reynolds and Gainsborough paint no more; yet let us be practical: Sargent, in this particular, could not serve us ill.

Her annoyance at finding herself lingering to listen to him was marked in an almost imperceptible gathering of her brows. It was all the matter of an instant. His heart beat fast in his joy at the sight of her, and the tongue that years of practice had skilled in reserve and evasion was possessed by a reckless spirit.

She nodded carelessly, but said nothing, waiting for him to go on.

"But when I wait for people they always come—even in a strange pergola!" he added daringly. "Now, in Geneva, not long ago—"

He lost the profile and gained her face as he liked it best, though her head was lifted a little high in resentment against her own yielding curiosity. He was speaking rapidly, and the slight hint of some other tongue than his usually fluent English arrested her ear now, as it had at other times.

"In Geneva, when I told a young lady that I was waiting for a very wicked man to appear—it was really the oddest thing in the world that almost immediately Monsieur Jules Chauvenet arrived at mine own inn! It is inevitable; it is always sure to be my fate," he concluded mournfully.

He bowed low, restored the shabby hat to his head with the least bit of a flourish and strolled away through the garden by a broad walk that led to the front gate.

He would have been interested to know that when he was out of sight Shirley walked to the veranda rail and bent forward, listening to his steps on the gravel, after the hedge and shrubbery had hidden him. And she stood thus until the faint click of the gate told her that he had gone.

She did not know that as the gate closed upon him he met Chauvenet face to face.

CHAPTER XIV

AN ENFORCED INTERVIEW

En garde, Messieurs! And if my hand is hard,
Remember I've been buffeting at will;
I am a whit impatient, and 'tis ill
To cross a hungry dog. *Messieurs, en garde.*

—W. Lindsey.

"Monsieur Chauvenet!"

Armitage uncovered smilingly. Chauvenet stared mutely as Armitage paused with his back to the Clai-borne gate. Chauvenet was dressed with his usual care, and wore the latest carnation in the lapel of his top-coat. He struck the ground with his stick, his look of astonishment passed, and he smiled pleasantly as he returned Armitage's salutation.

"My dear Armitage!" he murmured.

"I didn't go to Mexico after all, my good Chauvenet. The place is full of fevers; I couldn't take the risk."

"He is indeed a wise man who safeguards his health," replied the other.