

CHAPTER XV

SHIRLEY LEARNS A SECRET

Nightingales warble about it
All night under blossom and star;
The wild swan is dying without it,
And the eagle crieth afar;
The sun, he doth mount but to find it
Searching the green earth o'er;
But more doth a man's heart mind it—
O more, more, more!

—G. E. Woodberry.

Shirley Claiborne was dressed for a ride, and while waiting for her horse she re-read her brother's letter; and the postscript, which follows, she read twice:

"I shall never live down my acquaintance with the delectable Armitage. My brother officers insist on rubbing it in. I even hear, *ma chérie*, that you have gone into retreat by reason of the exposure. I'll admit, for your consolation, that he really took me in; and, further, I really wonder who the devil he is,—or *was!* Our last interview at the Club, after Chauvenet told his story, lingers with me disagreeably. I was naturally pretty hot to find him playing the darkly mysterious,

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which never did go with me,—after eating my bird and drinking my bottle. As a precaution I have looked up Chauvenet to the best of my ability. At the Austro-Hungarian Embassy they speak well of him. He's over here to collect the price of a few cruisers or some such rubbish from one of our sister republics below the Gulf. But bad luck to all foreigners! Me for America every time!"

"Dear old Dick!" and she dropped the letter into a drawer and went out into the sunshine, mounted her horse and turned toward the hills.

She had spent the intermediate seasons of the year at Storm Springs ever since she could remember, and had climbed the surrounding hills and dipped into the valleys with a boy's zest and freedom. The Virginia mountains were linked in her mind to the dreams of her youth, to her earliest hopes and aspirations, and to the books she had read, and she galloped happily out of the valley to the tune of an old ballad. She rode as a woman should, astride her horse and not madly clinging to it in the preposterous ancient fashion. She had known horses from early years, in which she had tumbled from her pony's back in the stable-yard, and she knew how to train a horse to a gait and how to master a beast's fear; and

even some of the tricks of the troopers in the Fort Myer drill she had surreptitiously practised in the meadow back of the Claiborne stable.

It was on Tuesday that John Armitage had appeared before her in the pergola. It was now Thursday afternoon, and Chauvenet had been to see her twice since, and she had met him the night before at a dance at one of the cottages.

Judge Claiborne was distinguished for his acute and sinewy mind; but he had, too, a strong feeling for art in all its expressions, and it was his gift of imagination,—the ability to forecast the enemy's strategy and then strike his weakest point,—that had made him a great lawyer and diplomat. Shirley had played chess with her father until she had learned to see around corners as he did, and she liked a problem, a test of wit, a contest of powers. She knew how to wait and ponder in silence, and therein lay the joy of the saddle, when she could ride alone with no groom to bother her, and watch enchantments unfold on the hilltops.

Once free of the settlement she rode far and fast, until she was quite beyond the usual routes of the Springs excursionists; then in mountain byways she enjoyed the luxury of leisure and dismounted now and

then to delight in the green of the laurel and question the rhododendrons.

Jules Chauvenet had scoured the hills all day and explored many mountain paths and inquired cautiously of the natives. The telegraph operator at the Storm Springs inn was a woman, and the despatch and receipt by Jules Chauvenet of long messages, many of them in cipher, piqued her curiosity. No member of the Washington diplomatic circle who came to the Springs,—not even the shrewd and secretive Russian Ambassador,—received longer or more cryptic cables. With the social diversions of the Springs and the necessity for making a show of having some legitimate business in America, Jules Chauvenet was pretty well occupied; and now the presence of John Armitage in Virginia added to his burdens.

He was tired and perplexed, and it was with unaffected pleasure that he rode out of an obscure hill-path into a bit of open wood overhanging a curious defile and came upon Shirley Claiborne.

The soil was soft and his horse carried him quite near before she heard him. A broad sheet of water flashed down the farther side of the narrow pass, sending up a pretty spurt of spray wherever it struck the jutting rock.

As Shirley turned toward him he urged his horse over the springy turf.

"A pity to disturb the picture, Miss Claiborne! A thousand pardons! But I really wished to see whether the figure could come out of the canvas. Now that I have dared to make the test, pray do not send me away."

Her horse turned restlessly and brought her face to face with Chauvenet.

"Steady, Fanny! Don't come near her, please—" this last to Chauvenet, who had leaped down and put out his hand to her horse's bridle. She had the true horsewoman's pride in caring for herself and her eyes flashed angrily for a moment at Chauvenet's proffered aid. A man might open a door for her or pick up her handkerchief, but to touch her horse was an altogether different business. The pretty, graceful mare was calm in a moment and arched her neck contentedly under the stroke of Shirley's hand.

"Beautiful! The picture is even more perfect, Mademoiselle!"

"Fanny is best in action, and splendid when she runs away. She hasn't run away to-day, but I think she is likely to before I get home."

She was thinking of the long ride which she had no

intention of taking in Chauvenet's company. He stood uncovered beside her, holding his horse.

"But the danger, Mademoiselle! You should not hazard your life with a runaway horse on these roads. It is not fair to your friends."

"You are a conservative, Monsieur. I should be ashamed to have a runaway in a city park, but what does one come to the country for?"

"What, indeed, but for excitement? You are not of those tame young women across the sea who come out into the world from a convent, frightened at all they see and whisper 'Yes, Sister,' 'No, Sister,' to everything they hear."

"Yes; we Americans are deficient in shyness and humility. I have often heard it remarked, Monsieur Chauvenet."

"No! No! You misunderstand! Those deficiencies, as you term them, are delightful; they are what give the charm to the American woman. I hope you would not believe me capable of speaking in disparagement, Mademoiselle,—you must know—"

The water tumbled down the rock into the vale; the soft air was sweet with the scent of pines. An eagle cruised high against the blue overhead. Shirley's hand

tightened on the rein, and Fanny lifted her head expectantly.

Chauvenet went on rapidly in French:

"You must know why I am here—why I have crossed the sea to seek you in your own home. I have loved you, Mademoiselle, from the moment I first saw you in Florence. Here, with only the mountains, the sky, the wood, I must speak. You must hear—you must believe, that I love you! I offer you my life, my poor attainments—"

"Monsieur, you do me a great honor, but I can not listen. What you ask is impossible, quite impossible. But, Monsieur—"

Her eyes had fallen upon a thicket behind him where something had stirred. She thought at first that it was an animal of some sort; but she saw now quite distinctly a man's shabby felt hat that rose slowly until the bearded face of its wearer was disclosed.

"Monsieur!" cried Shirley in a low tone; "look behind you and be careful what you say or do. Leave the man to me."

Chauvenet turned and faced a scowling mountaineer who held a rifle and drew it to his shoulder as Chauvenet threw out his arms, dropped them to his thighs and laughed carelessly.

"What is it, my dear fellow—my watch—my purse—my horse?" he said in English.

"He wants none of those things," said Shirley, urging her horse a few steps toward the man. "The mountain people are not robbers. What can we do for you?" she asked pleasantly.

"You cain't do nothin' for me," drawled the man. "Go on away, Miss. I want to see this little fella'. I got a little business with him."

"He is a foreigner—he knows little of our language. You will do best to let me stay," said Shirley.

She had not the remotest idea of what the man wanted, but she had known the mountain folk from childhood and well understood that familiarity with their ways and tact were necessary in dealing with them.

"Miss, I have seen you befo', and I reckon we ain't got no cause for trouble with you; but this little fella' ain't no business up hy'eh. Them hotel people has their own places to ride and drive, and it's all right for you, Miss; but what's yo' frien' ridin' the hills for at night? He's lookin' for some un', and I reckon as how that some un' air me!"

He spoke drawlingly with a lazy good humor in his tones, and Shirley's wits took advantage of his deliber-

ation to consider the situation from several points of view. Chauvenet stood looking from Shirley to the man and back again. He was by no means a coward, and he did not in the least relish the thought of owing his safety to a woman. But the confidence with which Shirley addressed the man, and her apparent familiarity with the peculiarities of the mountaineers impressed him. He spoke to her rapidly in French.

"Assure the man that I never heard of him before in my life—that the idea of seeking him never occurred to me."

The rifle—a repeater of the newest type—went to the man's shoulder in a flash and the blue barrel pointed at Chauvenet's head.

"None o' that! I reckon the American language air good enough for these 'ere negotiations."

Chauvenet shrugged his shoulders; but he gazed into the muzzle of the rifle unflinchingly.

"The gentleman was merely explaining that you are mistaken; that he does not know you and never heard of you before, and that he has not been looking for you in the mountains or anywhere else."

As Shirley spoke these words very slowly and distinctly she questioned for the first time Chauvenet's po-

tightened her grasp on the rein. She addressed Chauvenet in English as a mark of good faith to their captor.

"Ride on, Monsieur; do not wait for me."

"But it is growing dark—I can not leave you alone, Mademoiselle. You have rendered me a great service, when it is I who should have extricated you—"

"Pray do not mention it! It is a mere chance that I am able to help. I shall be perfectly safe with this gentleman."

The mountaineer took off his hat.

"Thank ye, Miss," he said; and then to Chauvenet: "Get out!"

"Don't trouble about me in the least, Monsieur Chauvenet," and Shirley affirmed the last word with a nod as Chauvenet jumped into his saddle and rode off. When the swift gallop of his horse had carried him out of sight and sound down the road, Shirley faced the mountaineer.

"What is your name?"

"Tom Selfridge."

"Whom did you take that man to be, Mr. Selfridge?" asked Shirley, and in her eagerness she bent down above the mountaineer's bared tangle of tow.

"The name you called him ain't it. It's a queer name I never heerd tell on befo'—it's—it's like the a'my—"

"Is it Armitage?" asked Shirley quickly.

"That's it, Miss! The postmaster over at Lamar told me to look out fer 'im. He's moved up hy'eh, and it ain't fer no good. The word's out that a city man's lookin' for *something* or *somebody* in these hills. And the man's stayin'—"

"Where?"

"At the huntin' club where folks don't go no more. I ain't seen him, but th' word's passed. He's a city man and a stranger, and got a little fella' that's been a soldier into th' army stayin' with 'im. I thought yo' furriner was him, Miss, honest to God I did."

The incident amused Shirley and she laughed aloud. She had undoubtedly gained information that Chauvenet had gone forth to seek; she had—and the thing was funny—served Chauvenet well in explaining away his presence in the mountains and getting him out of the clutches of the mountaineer, while at the same time she was learning for herself the fact of Armitage's whereabouts and keeping it from Chauvenet. It was a curious adventure, and she gave her hand smilingly to the mystified and still doubting mountaineer.

"I give you my word of honor that neither man is a government officer and neither one has the slightest interest in you—will you believe me?"

"I reckon I got to, Miss."

"Good; and now, Mr. Selfridge, it is growing dark and I want you to walk down this trail with me until we come to the Storm Springs road."

"I'll do it gladly, Miss."

"Thank you; now let us be off."

She made him turn back when they reached a point from which they could look upon the electric lights of the Springs colony, and where the big hotel and its piazzas shone like a steamship at night. A moment later Chauvenet, who had waited impatiently, joined her, and they rode down together. She referred at once to the affair with the mountaineer in her most frivolous key.

"They are an odd and suspicious people, but they're as loyal as the stars. And please let us never mention the matter again—not to any one, if you please, Monsieur!"