

CHAPTER XVI

NARROW MARGINS

The black-caps pipe among the reeds,
And there'll be rain to follow;
There is a murmur as of wind
In every coign and hollow;
The wrens do chatter of their fears
While swinging on the barley-ears.

—*Amélie Rives.*

The Judge and Mrs. Claiborne were dining with some old friends in the valley, and Shirley, left alone, carried to the table several letters that had come in the late mail. The events of the afternoon filled her mind, and she was not sorry to be alone. It occurred to her that she was building up a formidable tower of strange secrets, and she wondered whether, having begun by keeping her own counsel as to the attempts she had witnessed against John Armitage's life, she ought now to unfold all she knew to her father or to Dick. In the twentieth century homicide was not a common practice among men she knew or was likely to know; and the feeling of culpa-

bility for her silence crossed lances with a deepening sympathy for Armitage. She had learned where he was hiding, and she smiled at the recollection of the trifling bit of strategy she had practised upon Chauvenet.

The maid who served Shirley noted with surprise the long pauses in which her young mistress sat staring across the table lost in reverie. A pretty picture was Shirley in these intervals: one hand raised to her cheek, bright from the sting of the spring wind in the hills. Her forearm, white and firm and strong, was circled by a band of Roman gold, the only ornament she wore, and when she lifted her hand with its quick deft gesture, the trinket flashed away from her wrist and clasped the warm flesh as though in joy of the closer intimacy. Her hair was swept up high from her brow; her nose, straight, like her father's, was saved from arrogance by a sensitive mouth, all eloquent of kindness and wholesome mirth—but we take unfair advantage! A girl dining in candle-light with only her dreams for company should be safe from impertinent eyes.

She had kept Dick's letter till the last. He wrote often and in the key of his talk. She dropped a lump of sugar into her coffee-cup and read his hurried scrawl:

“What do you think has happened now? I have four-

teen dollars' worth of telegrams from Sanderson—wiring from some God-forsaken hole in Montana, that it's all rot about Armitage being that fake Baron von Kissel. The newspaper accounts of the *exposé* at my supper party had just reached him, and he says Armitage was on his (Armitage's) ranch all that summer the noble baron was devastating our northern sea-coast. Where, may I ask, does this leave me? And what cad gave that story to the papers? And where and *who* is John Armitage? Keep this mum for the present—even from the governor. If Sanderson is right, Armitage will undoubtedly turn up again—he has a weakness for turning up in your neighborhood!—and sooner or later he's bound to settle accounts with Chauvenet. Now that I think of it, who in the devil is *he*! And why didn't Armitage call him down there at the club? As I think over the whole business my mind grows addled, and I feel as though I had been kicked by a horse."

Shirley laughed softly, keeping the note open before her and referring to it musingly as she stirred her coffee. She could not answer any of Dick's questions, but her interest in the contest between Armitage and Chauvenet was intensified by this latest turn in the affair. She read for an hour in the library, but the air was close, and she threw aside her book, drew on a light coat and went out

upon the veranda. A storm was stealing down from the hills, and the fitful wind tasted of rain. She walked the length of the veranda several times, then paused at the farther end of it, where steps led out into the pergola. There was still a mist of starlight, and she looked out upon the vague outlines of the garden with thoughts of its needs and the gardener's work for the morrow. Then she was aware of a light step far out in the pergola, and listened carelessly to mark it, thinking it one of the house servants returning from a neighbor's; but the sound was furtive, and as she waited it ceased abruptly. She was about to turn into the house to summon help when she heard a stir in the shrubbery in quite another part of the garden, and in a moment the stooping figure of a man moved swiftly toward the pergola.

Shirley stood quite still, watching and listening. The sound of steps in the pergola reached her again, then the rush of flight, and out in the garden a flying figure darted in and out among the walks. For several minutes two dark figures played at vigorous hide-and-seek. Occasionally gravel crunched underfoot and shrubbery snapped back with a sharp swish where it was caught and held for support at corners. Pursued and pursuer were alike silent; the scene was like a pantomime.

Then the tables seemed to be turned; the bulkier figure of the pursuer was now in flight; and Shirley lost both for a moment, but immediately a dark form rose at the wall; she heard the scratch of feet upon the brick surface as a man gained the top, turned and lifted his arm as though aiming a weapon.

Then a dark object, hurled through the air, struck him squarely in the face and he tumbled over the wall, and Shirley heard him crash through the hedge of the neighboring estate, then all was quiet again.

The game of hide-and-peek in the garden and the scramble over the wall had consumed only two or three minutes, and Shirley now waited, her eyes bent upon the darkly-outlined pergola for some manifestation from the remaining intruder. A man now walked rapidly toward the veranda, carrying a cloak on his arm. She recognized Armitage instantly. He doffed his hat and bowed. The lights of the house lamps shone full upon him, and she saw that he was laughing a little breathlessly.

"This is really fortunate, Miss Claiborne. I owe your house an apology, and if you will grant me audience I will offer it to you."

He threw the cloak over his shoulder and fanned himself with his hat.

"You are a most informal person, Mr. Armitage," said Shirley coldly.

"I'm afraid I am! The most amazing ill luck follows me! I had dropped in to enjoy the quiet and charm of your garden, but the tranquil life is not for me. There was another gentleman, equally bent on enjoying the pergola. We engaged in a pretty running match, and because I was fleet of foot he grew ugly and tried to put me out of commission."

He was still laughing, but Shirley felt that he was again trying to make light of a serious situation, and a further tie of secrecy with Armitage was not to her liking. As he walked boldly to the veranda steps, she stepped back from him.

"No! No! This is impossible—it will not do at all, Mr. Armitage. It is not kind of you to come here in this strange fashion."

"In this way forsooth! How could I send in my card when I was being chased all over the estate! I didn't mean to apologize for coming"—and he laughed again, with a sincere mirth that shook her resolution to deal harshly with him. "But," he went on, "it was the flower-pot! He was mad because I beat him in the foot-race and wanted to shoot me from the wall, and I tossed him

a potted geranium—geraniums are splendid for the purpose—and it caught him square in the head. I have the knack of it! Once before I handed him a boiling-pot!”

“It must have hurt him,” said Shirley; and he laughed at her tone that was meant to be severe.

“I certainly hope so; I most devoutly hope he felt it! He was most tenderly solicitous for my health; and if he had really shot me there in the garden it would have had an ugly look. Armitage, the false baron, would have been identified as a daring burglar, shot while trying to burglarize the Claiborne mansion! But I wouldn’t take the Claiborne plate for anything, I assure you!”

“I suppose you didn’t think of us—all of us, and the unpleasant consequences to my father and brother if something disagreeable happened here!”

There was real anxiety in her tone, and he saw that he was going too far with his light treatment of the affair. His tone changed instantly.

“Please forgive me! I would not cause embarrassment or annoyance to any member of your family for kingdoms. I didn’t know I was being followed—I had come here to see you. That is the truth of it.”

“You mustn’t try to see me! You mustn’t come here at all unless you come with the knowledge of my father.

And the very fact that your life is sought so persistently—at most unusual times and in impossible places, leaves very much to explain.”

“I know that! I realize all that!”

“Then you must not come! You must leave instantly.”

She walked away toward the front door; but he followed, and at the door she turned to him again. They were in the full glare of the door lamps, and she saw that his face was very earnest, and as he began to speak he flinched and shifted the cloak awkwardly.

“You have been hurt—why did you not tell me that?”

“It is nothing—the fellow had a knife, and he—but it’s only a trifle in the shoulder. I must be off!”

The lightning had several times leaped sharply out of the hills; the wind was threshing the garden foliage, and now the rain roared on the tin roof of the veranda.

As he spoke a carriage rolled into the grounds and came rapidly toward the porte-cochère.

“I’m off—please believe in me—a little.”

“You must not go if you are hurt—and you can’t run away now—my father and mother are at the door.”

There was an instant’s respite while the carriage drew

up to the veranda steps. She heard the stable-boy running out to help with the horses.

"You can't go now; come in and wait."

There was no time for debate. She flung open the door and swept him past her with a gesture—through the library and beyond, into a smaller room used by Judge Claiborne as an office. Armitage sank down on a leather couch as Shirley flung the portières together with a sharp rattle of the rod rings.

She walked toward the hall door as her father and mother entered from the veranda.

"Ah, Miss Claiborne! Your father and mother picked me up and brought me in out of the rain. Your Storm Valley is giving us a taste of its powers."

And Shirley went forward to greet Baron von Marhof.

CHAPTER XVII

A GENTLEMAN IN HIDING

Oh, sweetly fall the April days!
 My love was made of frost and light,
 Of light to warm and frost to blight
 The sweet, strange April of her ways.
 Eyes like a dream of changing skies,
 And every frown and blush I prize.
 With cloud and flush the spring comes in,
 With frown and blush maids' loves begin;
 For love is rare like April days.

—L. Frank Tooker.

Mrs. Claiborne excused herself shortly, and Shirley, her father and the Ambassador talked to the accompaniment of the shower that drove in great sheets against the house. Shirley was wholly uncomfortable over the turn of affairs. The Ambassador would not leave until the storm abated, and meanwhile Armitage must remain where he was. If by any chance he should be discovered in the house no ordinary excuses would explain away his presence, and as she pondered the matter, it was Armitage's plight—his injuries and the dangers that beset