

died instantly, muffled by the night. She opened the gate as he began to promise not to appear before her again in any way to bring her trouble; but her low whisper arrested him.

"Do not let them hurt you again—" she said; and he felt her hand seek his, felt its cool furtive pressure for a moment; and then she was gone. He heard the house door close a moment later, and gazing across the garden, saw the lights on the veranda flash out.

Then with a smile on his face he strode away to find Oscar and the horses.

## CHAPTER XVIII

## AN EXCHANGE OF MESSAGES

When youth was lord of my unchallenged fate,  
And time seemed but the vassal of my will,  
I entertainéd certain guests of state—  
The great of older days, who, faithful still,  
Have kept with me the pact my youth had made.

—S. Weir Mitchell.

"Who am I?" asked John Armitage soberly.

He tossed the stick of a match into the fireplace, where a pine-knot smoldered, drew his pipe into a glow and watched Oscar screw the top on a box of ointment which he had applied to Armitage's arm. The little soldier turned and stood sharply at attention.

"You are Mr. John Armitage, sir. A man's name is what he says it is. It is the rule of the country."

"Thank you, Oscar. Your words reassure me. There have been times lately when I have been in doubt myself. You are a pretty good doctor."

"First aid to the injured; I learned the trick from a hospital steward. If you are not poisoned, and do not die, you will recover—yes?"

"Thank you, Sergeant. You are a consoling spirit; but I assure you on my honor as a gentleman that if I die I shall certainly haunt you. This is the fourth day. To-morrow I shall throw away the bandage and be quite ready for more trouble."

"It would be better on the fifth—"

"The matter is settled. You will now go for the mail; and do take care that no one pots you on the way. Your death would be a positive loss to me, Oscar. And if any one asks how My Majesty is—mark, My Majesty—pray say that I am quite well and equal to ruling over many kingdoms."

"Yes, sire."

And Armitage roared with laughter, as the little man, pausing as he buckled a cartridge belt under his coat, bowed with a fine mockery of reverence.

"If a man were king he could have a devilish fine time of it, Oscar."

"He could review many troops and they would fire salutes until the powder cost much money."

"You are mighty right, as we say in Montana; and I'll tell you quite confidentially, Sergeant, that if I were out of work and money and needed a job the thought of being king might tempt me. These gentlemen who are

trying to stick knives into me think highly of my chances. They may force me into the business—" and Armitage rose and kicked the flaring knot.

Oscar drew on his gauntlet with a jerk.

"They killed the great prime minister—yes?"

"They undoubtedly did, Oscar."

"He was a good man—he was a very great man," said Oscar slowly, and went quickly out and closed the door softly after him.

The life of the two men in the bungalow was established in a definite routine. Oscar was drilled in habits of observation and attention and he realized without being told that some serious business was afoot; he knew that Armitage's life had been attempted, and that the receipt and despatch of telegrams was a part of whatever errand had brought his master to the Virginia hills. His occupations were wholly to his liking; there was simple food to eat; there were horses to tend; and his errands abroad were of the nature of scouting and in keeping with one's dignity who had been a soldier. He rose often at night to look abroad, and sometimes he found Armitage walking the veranda or returning from a tramp through the wood. Armitage spent much time studying papers; and once, the day after Armitage sub-

mitted his wounded arm to Oscar's care, he had seemed upon the verge of a confidence.

"To save life; to prevent disaster; to do a little good in the world—to do something for Austria—such things are to the soul's credit, Oscar," and then Armitage's mood changed and he had begun chaffing in a fashion that was beyond Oscar's comprehension.

The little soldier rode over the hills to Lamar Station in the waning spring twilight, asked at the telegraph office for messages, stuffed Armitage's mail into his pockets at the post-office, and turned home as the moonlight poured down the slopes and flooded the valleys. The Virginia roads have been cursed by larger armies than any that ever marched in Flanders, but Oscar was not a swearing man. He paused to rest his beast occasionally and to observe the landscape with the eye of a strategist. Moonlight, he remembered, was a useful accessory of the assassin's trade, and the faint sounds of the spring night were all promptly traced to their causes as they reached his alert ears.

At the gate of the hunting-park grounds he bent forward in the saddle to lift the chain that held it; urged his horse inside, bent down to refasten it, and as his fingers clutched the iron a man rose in the shadow of

the little lodge and clasped him about the middle. The iron chain swung free and rattled against the post, and the horse snorted with fright, then, at a word from Oscar, was still. There was the barest second of waiting, in which the long arms tightened, and the great body of his assailant hung heavily about him; then he dug spurs into the horse's flanks and the animal leaped forward with a snort of rage, jumped out of the path and tore away through the woods.

Oscar's whole strength was taxed to hold his seat as the burly figure thumped against the horse's flanks. He had hoped to shake the man off, but the great arms still clasped him. The situation could not last. Oscar took advantage of the moonlight to choose a spot in which to terminate it. He had his bearings now, and as they crossed an opening in the wood he suddenly loosened his grip on the horse and flung himself backward. His assailant, no longer supported, rolled to the ground with Oscar on top of him, and the freed horse galloped away toward the stable.

A rough and tumble fight now followed. Oscar's lithe, vigorous body writhed in the grasp of his antagonist, now free, now clasped by giant arms. They saw each other's faces plainly in the clear moonlight, and at

breathless pauses in the struggle their eyes maintained the state of war. At one instant, when both men lay with arms interlocked, half-lying on their thighs, Oscar hissed in the giant's ear:

"You are a Servian: it is an ugly race."

And the Servian cursed him in a fierce growl.

"We expected you; you are a bad hand with the knife," grunted Oscar, and feeling the bellows-like chest beside him expand, as though in preparation for a renewal of the fight, he suddenly wrenched himself free of the Servian's grasp, leaped away a dozen paces to the shelter of a great pine, and turned, revolver in hand.

"Throw up your hands," he yelled.

The Servian fired without pausing for aim, the shot ringing out sharply through the wood. Then Oscar discharged his revolver three times in quick succession, and while the discharges were still keen on the air he drew quickly back to a clump of underbrush, and crept away a dozen yards to watch events. The Servian, with his eyes fixed upon the tree behind which his adversary had sought shelter, grew anxious, and thrust his head forward warily.

Then he heard a sound as of some one running

through the wood to the left and behind him, but still the man he had grappled on the horse made no sign. It dawned upon him that the three shots fired in front of him had been a signal, and in alarm he turned toward the gate, but a voice near at hand called loudly, "Oscar!" and repeated the name several times.

Behind the Servian the little soldier answered sharply in English:

"All steady, sir!"

The use of a strange tongue added to the Servian's bewilderment, and he fled toward the gate, with Oscar hard after him. Then Armitage suddenly leaped out of the shadows directly in his path and stopped him with a leveled revolver.

"Easy work, Oscar! Take the gentleman's gun and be sure to find his knife."

The task was to Oscar's taste, and he made quick work of the Servian's pockets.

"Your horse was a good despatch bearer. You are all sound, Oscar?"

"Never better, sir. A revolver and two knives—" the weapons flashed in the moonlight as he held them up.

"Good! Now start your friend toward the bungalow."

They set off at a quick pace, soon found the rough

driveway, and trudged along silently, the Servian between his captors.

When they reached the house Armitage flung open the door and followed Oscar and the prisoner into the long sitting-room.

Armitage lighted a pipe at the mantel, readjusted the bandage on his arm, and laughed aloud as he looked upon the huge figure of the Servian standing beside the sober little cavalryman.

"Oscar, there are certainly giants in these days, and we have caught one. You will please see that the cylinder of your revolver is in good order and prepare to act as clerk of our court-martial. If the prisoner moves, shoot him."

He spoke these last words very deliberately in German, and the Servian's small eyes blinked his comprehension. Armitage sat down on the writing-table, with his own revolver and the prisoner's knives and pistol within reach of his available hand. A smile of amusement played over his face as he scrutinized the big body and its small, bullet-like head.

"He is a large devil," commented Oscar.

"He is large, certainly," remarked Armitage. "Give him a chair. Now," he said to the man in deliberate

German, "I shall say a few things to you which I am very anxious for you to understand. You are a Servian."

The man nodded.

"Your name is Zmai Miletich."

The man shifted his great bulk uneasily in his chair and fastened his lusterless little eyes upon Armitage.

"Your name," repeated Armitage, "is Zmai Miletich; your home is, or was, in the village of Toplica, where you were a blacksmith until you became a thief. You are employed as an assassin by two gentlemen known as Chauvenet and Durand—do you follow me?"

The man was indeed following him with deep engrossment. His narrow forehead was drawn into minute wrinkles; his small eyes seemed to recede into his head; his great body turned uneasily.

"I ask you again," repeated Armitage, "whether you follow me. There must be no mistake."

Oscar, anxious to take his own part in the conversation, prodded Zmai in the ribs with a pistol barrel, and the big fellow growled and nodded his head.

"There is a house in the outskirts of Vienna where you have been employed at times as gardener, and another house in Geneva where you wait for orders. At this

latter place it was my great pleasure to smash you in the head with a boiling-pot on a certain evening in March."

The man scowled and ejaculated an oath with so much venom that Armitage laughed.

"Your conspirators are engaged upon a succession of murders, and when they have removed the last obstacle they will establish a new Emperor-king in Vienna and you will receive a substantial reward for what you have done—"

The blood suffused the man's dark face, and he half rose, a great roar of angry denial breaking from him.

"That will do. You tried to kill me on the *King Edward*; you tried your knife on me again down there in Judge Claiborne's garden; and you came up here tonight with a plan to kill my man and then take your time to me. Give me the mail, Oscar."

He opened the letters which Oscar had brought and scanned several that bore a Paris postmark, and when he had pondered their contents a moment he laughed and jumped from the table. He brought a portfolio from his bedroom and sat down to write.

"Don't shoot the gentleman as long as he is quiet. You may even give him a glass of whisky to soothe his feelings."

Armitage wrote:

"MONSIEUR:

"Your assassin is a clumsy fellow and you will do well to send him back to the blacksmith shop at Toplica. I learn that Monsieur Durand, distressed by the delay in affairs in America, will soon join you—is even now aboard the *Tacoma*, bound for New York. I am profoundly grateful for this, dear Monsieur, as it gives me an opportunity to conclude our interesting business in republican territory without prejudice to any of the parties chiefly concerned.

"You are a clever and daring rogue, yet at times you strike me as immensely dull, Monsieur. Ponder this: should it seem expedient for me to establish my identity—which I am sure interests you greatly—before Baron von Marhof, and, we will add, the American Secretary of State, be quite sure that I shall not do so until I have taken precautions against your departure in any unseemly haste. I, myself, dear friend, am not without a certain facility in setting traps."

Armitage threw down the pen and read what he had written with care. Then he wrote as signature the initials F. A., inclosed the note in an envelope and addressed it, pondered again, laughed and slapped his knee and went into his room, where he rummaged about

until he found a small seal beautifully wrought in bronze and a bit of wax. Returning to the table he lighted a candle, and deftly sealed the letter. He held the red scar on the back of the envelope to the lamp and examined it with interest. The lines of the seal were deep cut, and the impression was perfectly distinct, of F. A. in English script, linked together by the bar of the F.

"Oscar, what do you recommend that we do with the prisoner?"

"He should be tied to a tree and shot; or, perhaps, it would be better to hang him to the rafters in the kitchen. Yet he is heavy and might pull down the roof."

"You are a bloodthirsty wretch, and there is no mercy in you. Private executions are not allowed in this country; you would have us before a Virginia grand jury and our own necks stretched. No; we shall send him back to his master."

"It is a mistake. If your Excellency would go away for an hour he should never know where the buzzards found this large carcass."

"Tush! I would not trust his valuable life to you. Get up!" he commanded, and Oscar jerked Zmai to his feet.

"You deserve nothing at my hands, but I need a dis-

creet messenger, and you shall not die to-night, as my worthy adjutant recommends. To-morrow night, however, or the following night—or any other old night, as we say in America—if you show yourself in these hills, my chief of staff shall have his way with you—buzzard meat!"

"The orders are understood," said Oscar, thrusting the revolver into the giant's ribs.

"Now, Zmai, blacksmith of Toplica, and assassin at large, here is a letter for Monsieur Chauvenet. It is still early. When you have delivered it, bring me back the envelope with Monsieur's receipt written right here, under the seal. Do you understand?"

It had begun to dawn upon Zmai that his life was not in immediate danger, and the light of intelligence kindled again in his strange little eyes. Lest he might not fully grasp the errand with which Armitage intrusted him, Oscar repeated what Armitage had said in somewhat coarser terms.

Again through the moonlight strode the three—out of Armitage's land to the valley road and to the same point to which Shirley Claiborne had only a few days before been escorted by the mountaineer.

There they sent the Servian forward to the Springs,

and Armitage went home, leaving Oscar to wait for the return of the receipt.

It was after midnight when Oscar placed it in Armitage's hands at the bungalow.

"Oscar, it would be a dreadful thing to kill a man," Armitage declared, holding the empty envelope to the light and reading the line scrawled beneath the unbroken wax. It was in French:

"You are young to die, Monsieur."

"A man more or less!" and Oscar shrugged his shoulders.

"You are not a good churchman. It is a grievous sin to do murder."

"One may repent; it is so written. The people of your house are Catholics also."

"That is quite true, though I may seem to forget it. Our work will be done soon, please God, and we shall ask the blessed sacrament somewhere in these hills."

Oscar crossed himself and fell to cleaning his rifle.

## CHAPTER XIX

## CAPTAIN CLAIBORNE ON DUTY

When he came where the trees were thin,  
The moon sat waiting there to see;  
On her worn palm she laid her chin,  
And laughed awhile in sober glee  
To think how strong this knight had been.

—*William Vaughn Moody.*

In some mystification Captain Richard Claiborne packed a suit-case in his quarters at Fort Myer. Being a soldier, he obeyed orders; but being human, he was also possessed of a degree of curiosity. He did not know just the series of incidents and conferences that preceded his summons to Washington, but they may be summarized thus:

Baron von Marhof was a cautious man. When the young gentlemen of his legation spoke to him in awed whispers of a cigarette case bearing an extraordinary device that had been seen in Washington he laughed them away; then, possessing a curious and thorough mind, he read all the press clippings relating to the