

CHAPTER XX

THE FIRST RIDE TOGETHER

My mistress bent that brow of hers;
Those deep dark eyes where pride demurs
When pity would be softening through,
Fixed me a breathing-while or two

With life or death in the balance: right!
The blood replenished me again;
My last thought was at least not vain:
I and my mistress, side by side
Shall be together, breathe and ride,
So, one day more am I deified.

Who knows but the world may end to-night?

—R. Browning.

"We shall be leaving soon," said Armitage, half to himself and partly to Oscar. "It is not safe to wait much longer."

He tossed a copy of the *Neue Freie Presse* on the table. Oscar had been down to the Springs to explore, and brought back news, gained from the stablemen at the hotel, that Chauvenet had left the hotel, presumably for Washington. It was now Wednesday in the third week in April.

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"Oscar, you were a clever boy and knew more than you were told. You have asked me no questions. There may be an ugly row before I get out of these hills. I should not think hard of you if you preferred to leave."

"I enlisted for the campaign—yes?—I shall wait until I am discharged." And the little man buttoned his coat.

"Thank you, Oscar. In a few days more we shall probably be through with this business. There's another man coming to get into the game—he reached Washington yesterday, and we shall doubtless hear of him shortly. Very likely they are both in the hills tonight. And, Oscar, listen carefully to what I say."

The soldier drew nearer to Armitage, who sat swinging his legs on the table in the bungalow.

"If I should die unshriven during the next week, here's a key that opens a safety-vault box at the Bronx Loan and Trust Company, in New York. In case I am disabled, go at once with the key to Baron von Marhof, Ambassador of Austria-Hungary, and tell him—tell him—"

He had paused for a moment as though pondering his words with care; then he laughed and went on.

"—tell him, Oscar, that there's a message in that safety box from a gentleman who might have been King."

Oscar stared at Armitage blankly.

"That is the truth, Sergeant. The message once in the good Baron's hands will undoubtedly give him a severe shock. You will do well to go to bed. I shall take a walk before I turn in."

"You should not go out alone—"

"Don't trouble about me; I shan't go far. I think we are safe until two gentlemen have met in Washington, discussed their affairs, and come down into the mountains again. The large brute we caught the other night is undoubtedly on watch near by; but he is harmless. Only a few days more and we shall perform a real service in the world, Sergeant,—I feel it in my bones."

He took his hat from a bench by the door and went out upon the veranda. The moon had already slipped down behind the mountains, but the stars trooped brightly across the heavens. He drank deep breaths of the cool air of the mountain night, and felt the dark wooing him with its calm and peace. He returned for his cloak and walked into the wood. He followed the road to the gate, and then turned toward the Port of

Missing Men. He had formed quite definite plans of what he should do in certain emergencies, and he felt a new strength in his confidence that he should succeed in the business that had brought him into the hills.

At the abandoned bridge he threw himself down and gazed off through a narrow cut that afforded a glimpse of the Springs, where the electric lights gleamed as one lamp. Shirley Claiborne was there in the valley and he smiled with the thought of her; for soon—perhaps in a few hours—he would be free to go to her, his work done; and no mystery or dangerous task would henceforth lie between them.

He saw march before him across the night great hosts of armed men, singing hymns of war; and again he looked upon cities besieged; still again upon armies in long alignment waiting for the word that would bring the final shock of battle. The faint roar of water far below added an under-note of reality to his dream; and still he saw, as upon a tapestry held in his hand, the struggles of kingdoms, the rise and fall of empires. Upon the wide seas smoke floated from the guns of giant ships that strove mightily in battle. He was thrilled by drum-beats and the cry of trumpets. Then his mood changed and the mountains and calm stars

spoke an heroic language that was of newer and nobler things; and he shook his head impatiently and gathered his cloak about him and rose.

"God said, 'I am tired of kings,'" he muttered. "But I shall keep my pledge; I shall do Austria a service," he said; and then laughed a little to himself. "To think that it may be for me to say!" And with this he walked quite to the brink of the chasm and laid his hand upon the iron cable from which swung the bridge.

"I shall soon be free," he said with a deep sigh; and looked across the starlighted hills.

Then the cable under his hand vibrated slightly; at first he thought it the night wind stealing through the vale and swaying the bridge above the sheer depth. But still he felt the tingle of the iron rope in his clasp, and his hold tightened and he bent forward to listen. The whole bridge now audibly shook with the pulsation of a step—a soft, furtive step, as of one cautiously groping a way over the unsubstantial flooring. Then through the starlight he distinguished a woman's figure, and drew back. A loose plank in the bridge floor rattled, and as she passed it freed itself and he heard it strike the rocks faintly far below; but the figure stole swiftly on, and he bent forward with a cry of warning on his

lips, and snatched away the light barricade that had been nailed across the opening.

When he looked up, his words of rebuke, that had waited only for the woman's security, died on his lips.

"Shirley!" he cried; and put forth both hands and lifted her to firm ground.

A little sigh of relief broke from her. The bridge still swayed from her weight; and the cables hummed like the wires of a harp; near at hand the waterfall tumbled down through the mystical starlight.

"I did not know that dreams really came true," he said, with an awe in his voice that the passing fear had left behind.

She began abruptly, not heeding his words.

"You must go away—at once—I came to tell you that you can not stay here."

"But it is unfair to accept any warning from you! You are too generous, too kind,"—he began.

"It is not generosity or kindness, but this danger that follows you—it is an evil thing and it must not find you here. It is impossible that such a thing can be in America. But you must go—you must seek the law's aid—"

"How do you know I dare—"

"I don't know—that you dare!"

"I know that you have a great heart and that I love you," he said.

She turned quickly toward the bridge as though to retrace her steps.

"I can't be paid for a slight, a very slight service by fair words, Mr. Armitage. If you knew why I came—"

"If I dared think or believe or hope—"

"You will dare nothing of the kind, Mr. Armitage!" she replied; "but I will tell you, that I came out of ordinary Christian humanity. The idea of friends, of even slight acquaintances, being assassinated in these Virginia hills does not please me."

"How do you classify me, please—with friends or acquaintances?"

He laughed; then the gravity of what she was doing changed his tone.

"I am John Armitage. That is all you know, and yet you hazard your life to warn me that I am in danger?"

"If you called yourself John Smith I should do exactly the same thing. It makes not the slightest difference to me who or what you are."

"You are explicit!" he laughed. "I don't hesitate to tell you that I value your life much higher than you do."

"That is quite unnecessary. It may amuse you to know that, as I am a person of little curiosity, I am not the least concerned in the solution of—of—what might be called the Armitage riddle."

"Oh; I'm a riddle, am I?"

"Not to me, I assure you! You are only the object of some one's enmity, and there's something about murder that is—that isn't exactly nice! It's positively unesthetic."

She had begun seriously, but laughed at the absurdity of her last words.

"You are amazingly impersonal. You would save a man's life without caring in the least what manner of man he may be."

"You put it rather flatly, but that's about the truth of the matter. Do you know, I am almost afraid—"

"Not of me, I hope—"

"Certainly not. But it has occurred to me that you may have the conceit of your own mystery, that you may take rather too much pleasure in mystifying people as to your identity."

"That is unkind,—that is unkind," and he spoke without resentment, but softly, with a falling cadence.

He suddenly threw down the hat he had held in his hand, and extended his arms toward her.

"You are not unkind or unjust. You have a right to know who I am and what I am doing here. It seems an impertinence to thrust my affairs upon you; but if you will listen I should like to tell you—it will take but a moment—why and what—"

"Please do not! As I told you, I have no curiosity in the matter. I can't allow you to tell me; I really don't want to know!"

"I am willing that every one should know—to-morrow—or the day after—not later."

She lifted her head, as though with the earnestness of some new thought.

"The day after may be too late. Whatever it is that you have done—"

"I have done nothing to be ashamed of,—I swear I have not!"

"Whatever it is,—and I don't care what it is,"—she said deliberately, "—it is something quite serious, Mr. Armitage. My brother—"

She hesitated for a moment, then spoke rapidly.

"My brother has been detailed to help in the search for you. He is at Storm Springs now."

"But *he* doesn't understand—"

"My brother is a soldier and it is not necessary for him to understand."

"And you have done this—you have come to warn me—"

"It does look pretty bad," she said, changing her tone and laughing a little. "But my brother and I—we always had very different ideas about you, Mr. Armitage. We hold briefs for different sides of the case."

"Oh, I'm a case, am I?" and he caught gladly at the suggestion of lightness in her tone. "But I'd really like to know what he has to do with my affairs."

"Then you will have to ask him."

"To be sure. But the government can hardly have assigned Captain Claiborne to special duty at Monsieur Chauvenet's request. I swear to you that I'm as much in the dark as you are."

"I'm quite sure an officer of the line would not be taken from his duties and sent into the country on any frivolous errand. But perhaps an Ambassador from a great power made the request,—perhaps, for example, it was Baron von Marhof."

"Good Lord!"

Armitage laughed aloud.

"I beg your pardon! I really beg your pardon! But is the Ambassador looking for me?"

"I don't know, Mr. Armitage. You forget that I'm only a traitor and not a spy."

"You are the noblest woman in the world," he said boldly, and his heart leaped in him and he spoke on with a fierce haste. "You have made sacrifices for me that no woman ever made before for a man—for a man she did not know! And my life—whatever it is worth, every hour and second of it, I lay down before you, and it is yours to keep or throw away. I followed you half-way round the world and I shall follow you again and as long as I live. And to-morrow—or the day after—I shall justify these great kindnesses—this generous confidence; but to-night I have a work to do!"

As they stood on the verge of the defile, by the bridge that swung out from the cliff like a fairy structure, they heard far and faint the whistle and low rumble of the night train south-bound from Washington; and to both of them the sound urged the very real and practical world from which for a little time they had stolen away.

"I must go back," said Shirley, and turned to the bridge and put her hand on its slight iron frame; but he seized her wrists and held them tight.

"You have risked much for me, but you shall not risk your life again in my cause. You can not venture across that bridge again."

She yielded without further parley and he dropped her wrists at once.

"Please say no more. You must not make me sorry I came. I must go,—I should have gone back instantly."

"But not across that spider's web. You must go by the long road. I will give you a horse and ride with you into the valley."

"It is much nearer by the bridge,—and I have my horse over there."

"We shall get the horse without trouble," he said, and she walked beside him through the starlighted wood. As they crossed the open tract she said:

"This is the Port of Missing Men."

"Yes, here the lost legion made its last stand. There lie the graves of some of them. It's a pretty story; I hope some day to know more of it from some such authority as yourself."

"I used to ride here on my pony when I was a little girl, and dream about the gray soldiers who would not surrender. It was as beautiful as an old ballad. I'll

wait here. Fetch the horse," she said, "and hurry, please."

"If there are explanations to make," he began, looking at her gravely.

"I am not a person who makes explanations, Mr. Armitage. You may meet me at the gate."

As he ran toward the house he met Oscar, who had become alarmed at his absence and was setting forth in search of him.

"Come; saddle both the horses, Oscar," Armitage commanded.

They went together to the barn and quickly brought out the horses.

"You are not to come with me, Oscar."

"A captain does not go alone; it should be the sergeant who is sent—yes?"

"It is not an affair of war, Oscar, but quite another matter. There is a saddled horse hitched to the other side of our abandoned bridge. Get it and ride it to Judge Claiborne's stables; and ask and answer no questions."

A moment later he was riding toward the gate, the led-horse following.

He flung himself down, adjusting the stirrups and

gave her a hand into the saddle. They turned silently into the mountain road.

"The bridge would have been simpler and quicker," said Shirley; "as it is, I shall be late to the ball."

"I am contrite enough; but you don't make explanations."

"No; I don't explain; and you are to come back as soon as we strike the valley. I always send gentlemen back at that point," she laughed, and went ahead of him into the narrow road. She guided the strange horse with the ease of long practice, skilfully testing his paces, and when they came to a stretch of smooth road sent him flying at a gallop over the trail. He had given her his own horse, a hunter of famous strain, and she at once defined and maintained a distance between them that made talk impossible.

Her short covert riding-coat, buttoned close, marked clearly in the starlight her erect figure; light wisps of loosened hair broke free under her soft felt hat, and when she turned her head the wind caught the brim and pressed it back from her face, giving a new charm to her profile.

He called after her once or twice at the start, but she did not pause or reply; and he could not know what

mood possessed her; or that once in flight, in the security the horse gave her, she was for the first time afraid of him. He had declared his love for her, and had offered to break down the veil of mystery that made him a strange and perplexing figure. His affairs, whatever their nature, were now at a crisis, he had said; quite possibly she should never see him again after this ride. As she waited at the gate she had known a moment of contrition and doubt as to what she had done. It was not fair to her brother thus to give away his secret to the enemy; but as the horse flew down the rough road her blood leaped with the sense of adventure, and her pulse sang with the joy of flight. Her thoughts were free, wild things; and she exulted in the great starry vault and the cool heights over which she rode. Who was John Armitage? She did not know or care, now that she had performed for him her last service. Quite likely he would fade away on the morrow like a mountain shadow before the sun; and the song in her heart to-night was not love or anything akin to it, but only the joy of living.

Where the road grew difficult as it dipped sharply down into the valley she suffered him perforce to ride beside her.

"You ride wonderfully," he said.

"The horse is a joy. He's a Pendragon—I know them in the dark. He must have come from this valley somewhere. We own some of his cousins, I'm sure."

"You are quite right. He's a Virginia horse. You are incomparable—no other woman alive could have kept that pace. It's a brave woman who isn't a slave to her hair-pins—I don't believe you spilled one."

She drew rein at the cross-roads.

"We part here. How shall I return Bucephalus?"

"Let me go to your own gate, please!"

"Not at all!" she said with decision.

"Then Oscar will pick him up. If you don't see him, turn the horse loose. But my thanks—for oh, so many things!" he pleaded.

"To-morrow—or the day after—or never!"

She laughed and put out her hand; and when he tried to detain her she spoke to the horse and flashed away toward home. He listened, marking her flight until the shadows of the valley stole sound and sight from him; then he turned back into the hills.

Near her father's estate Shirley came upon a man who saluted in the manner of a soldier.

It was Oscar, who had crossed the bridge and ridden down by the nearer road.

"It is my captain's horse—yes?" he said, as the slim, graceful animal whinnied and pawed the ground. "I found a horse at the broken bridge and took it to your stable—yes?"

A moment later Shirley walked rapidly through the garden to the veranda of her father's house, where her brother Dick paced back and forth impatiently.

"Where have you been, Shirley?"

"Walking."

"But you went for a ride—the stable-men told me."

"I believe that is true, Captain."

"And your horse was brought home half an hour ago by a strange fellow who saluted like a soldier when I spoke to him, but refused to understand my English."

"Well, they do say English isn't very well taught at West Point, Captain," she replied, pulling off her gloves. "You oughtn't to blame the polite stranger for his courtesy."

"I believe you have been up to some mischief, Shirley. If you are seeing that man Armitage—"

"Captain!"

"Bah! What are you going to do now?"

"I'm going to the ball with you as soon as I can

change my gown. I suppose father and mother have gone."

"They have—for which you should be grateful!"

Captain Claiborne lighted a cigar and waited.