

CHAPTER XXI

THE COMEDY OF A SHEEPFOLD

A glance, a word—and joy or pain
Befalls; what was no more shall be.
How slight the links are in the chain
That binds us to our destiny!

—*T. B. Aldrich.*

Oscar's eye, roaming the landscape as he left Shirley Claiborne and started for the bungalow, swept the upland Claiborne acres and rested upon a moving shadow. He drew rein under a clump of wild cherry-trees at the roadside and waited. Several hundred yards away lay the Claiborne sheepfold, with a broad pasture rising beyond. A shadow is not a thing to be ignored by a man trained in the niceties of scouting. Oscar, satisfying himself that substance lay behind the shadow, dismounted and tied his horse. Then he bent low over the stone wall and watched.

"It is the big fellow—yes? He is a stealer of sheep, as I might have known."

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Zmai was only a dim figure against the dark meadow, which he was slowly crossing from the side farthest from the Claiborne house. He stopped several times as though uncertain of his whereabouts, and then clambered over a stone wall that formed one side of the sheepfold, passed it and strode on toward Oscar and the road.

"It is mischief that brings him from the hills—yes?" Oscar reflected, glancing up and down the highway. Faintly—very softly through the night he heard the orchestra at the hotel, playing for the dance. The little soldier unbuttoned his coat, drew the revolver from his belt, and thrust it into his coat pocket. Zmai was drawing nearer, advancing rapidly, now that he had gained his bearings. At the wall Oscar rose suddenly and greeted him in mockingly-courteous tones:

"Good evening, my friend; it's a fine evening for a walk."

Zmai drew back and growled.

"Let me pass," he said in his difficult German.

"It is a long wall; there should be no difficulty in passing. This country is much freer than Servia—yes?" and Oscar's tone was pleasantly conversational.

Zmai put his hand on the wall and prepared to vault.

"A moment only, comrade. You seem to be in a hurry; it must be a business that brings you from the mountains—yes?"

"I have no time for you," snarled the Servian. "Be gone!" and he shook himself impatiently and again put his hand on the wall.

"One should not be in too much haste, comrade;" and Oscar thrust Zmai back with his finger-tips.

The man yielded and ran a few steps out of the clump of trees and sought to escape there. It was clear to Oscar that Zmai was not anxious to penetrate closer to the Claiborne house, whose garden extended quite near. He met Zmai promptly and again thrust him back.

"It is a message—yes?" asked Oscar.

"It is my affair," blurted the big fellow. "I mean no harm to you."

"It was you that tried the knife on my body. It is much quieter than shooting. You have the knife—yes?"

The little soldier whipped out his revolver.

"In which pocket is the business carried? A letter undoubtedly. They do not trust swine to carry words—Ah!"

Oscar dropped below the wall as Zmai struck at him;

when he looked up a moment later the Servian was running back over the meadow toward the sheepfold. Oscar, angry at the ease with which the Servian had evaded him, leaped the wall and set off after the big fellow. He was quite sure that the man bore a written message, and equally sure that it must be of importance to his employer. He clutched his revolver tight, brought up his elbows for greater ease in running, and sped after Zmai, now a blur on the starlighted sheep pasture.

The slope was gradual and a pretty feature of the landscape by day; but it afforded a toilsome path for runners. Zmai already realized that he had blundered in not forcing the wall; he was running uphill, with a group of sheds, another wall, and a still steeper and rougher field beyond. His bulk told against him; and behind him he heard the quick thump of Oscar's feet on the turf. The starlight grew dimmer through tracts of white scud; the surface of the pasture was rougher to the feet than it appeared to the eye. A hound in the Claiborne stable-yard bayed suddenly and the sound echoed from the surrounding houses and drifted off toward the sheepfold. Then a noble music rose from the kennels.

Captain Claiborne, waiting for his sister on the veranda, looked toward the stables, listening.

Zmai approached the sheep-sheds rapidly, with still a hundred yards to traverse beyond them before he should reach the pasture wall. His rage at thus being driven by a small man for whom he had great contempt did not help his wind or stimulate the flight of his heavy legs, and he saw now that he would lessen the narrowing margin between himself and his pursuer if he swerved to the right to clear the sheds. He suddenly slackened his pace, and with a vicious tug settled his wool hat more firmly upon his small skull. He went now at a dog trot and Oscar was closing upon him rapidly; then, quite near the sheds, Zmai wheeled about and charged his pursuer headlong. At the moment he turned, Oscar's revolver bit keenly into the night. Captain Claiborne, looking toward the slope, saw the flash before the hounds at the stables answered the report.

At the shot Zmai cried aloud in his curiously small voice and clapped his hands to his head.

"Stop; I want the letter!" shouted Oscar in German. The man turned slowly, as though dazed, and, with a hand still clutching his head, half-stumbled and half-ran toward the sheds, with Oscar at his heels.

Claiborne called to the negro stable-men to quiet the dogs, snatched a lantern, and ran away through the pergola to the end of the garden and thence into the pasture beyond. Meanwhile Oscar, thinking Zmai badly hurt, did not fire again, but flung himself upon the fellow's broad shoulders and down they crashed against the door of the nearest pen. Zmai swerved and shook himself free while he fiercely cursed his foe. Oscar's hands slipped on the fellow's hot blood that ran from a long crease in the side of his head.

As they fell the pen door snapped free, and out into the starry pasture thronged the frightened sheep.

"The letter—give me the letter!" commanded Oscar, his face close to the Servian's. He did not know how badly the man was injured, but he was anxious to complete his business and be off. Still the sheep came huddling through the broken door, across the prostrate men, and scampered away into the open. Captain Claiborne, running toward the fold with his lantern and not looking for obstacles, stumbled over their bewildered advance guard and plunged headlong into the gray fleeces. Meanwhile into the pockets of his prostrate foe went Oscar's hands with no result. Then he remembered the man's gesture in pulling the hat close upon his ears,

and off came the hat and with it a blood-stained envelope. The last sheep in the pen trooped out and galloped toward its comrades.

Oscar, making off with the letter, plunged into the rear guard of the sheep, fell, stumbled to his feet, and confronted Captain Claiborne as that gentleman, in soiled evening dress, fumbled for his lantern and swore in language unbecoming an officer and a gentleman.

"Damn the sheep!" roared Claiborne.

"It is sheep—yes?" and Oscar started to bolt.

"Halt!"

The authority of the tone rang familiarly in Oscar's ears. He had, after considerable tribulation, learned to stop short when an officer spoke to him, and the gentleman of the sheepfold stood straight in the starlight and spoke like an officer.

"What in the devil are you doing here, and who fired that shot?"

Oscar saluted and summoned his best English.

"It was an accident, sir."

"Why are you running and why did you fire? Understand you are a trespasser here, and I am going to turn you over to the constable."

"There was a sheep-stealer—yes? He is yonder by the

pens—and we had some little fighting; but he is not dead—no?"

At that moment Claiborne's eyes caught sight of a burly figure rising and threshing about by the broken pen door.

"That is the sheep-stealer," said Oscar. "We shall catch him—yes?"

Zmai peered toward them uncertainly for a moment; then turned abruptly and ran toward the road. Oscar started to cut off his retreat, but Claiborne caught the sergeant by the shoulder and flung him back.

"One of you at a time! They can turn the hounds on the other rascal. What's that you have there? Give it to me—quick!"

"It's a piece of wool—"

But Claiborne snatched the paper from Oscar's hand, and commanded the man to march ahead of him to the house. So over the meadow and through the pergola they went, across the veranda and into the library. The power of army discipline was upon Oscar; if Claiborne had not been an officer he would have run for it in the garden. As it was, he was taxing his wits to find some way out of his predicament. He had not the slightest idea as to what the paper might be. He had

risked his life to secure it, and now the crumpled, blood-stained paper had been taken away from him by a person whom it could not interest in any way whatever.

He blinked under Claiborne's sharp scrutiny as they faced each other in the library.

"You are the man who brought a horse back to our stable an hour ago."

"Yes, sir."

"You have been a soldier."

"In the cavalry, sir. I have my discharge at home."

"Where do you live?"

"I work as teamster in the coal mines—yes?—they are by Lamar, sir."

Claiborne studied Oscar's erect figure carefully.

"Let me see your hands," he commanded; and Oscar extended his palms.

"You are lying; you do not work in the coal mines. Your clothes are not those of a miner; and a discharged soldier doesn't go to digging coal. Stand where you are, and it will be the worse for you if you try to bolt."

Claiborne turned to the table with the envelope. It was not sealed, and he took out the plain sheet of note-paper on which was written:

CABLEGRAM

WINKELRIED, VIENNA.

Not later than Friday.

CHAUVENET.

Claiborne read and re-read these eight words; then he spoke bluntly to Oscar.

"Where did you get this?"

"From the hat of the sheep-stealer up yonder."

"Who is he and where did he get it?"

"I don't know, sir. He was of Servia, and they are an ugly race—yes?"

"What were you going to do with the paper?"

Oscar grinned.

"If I could read it—yes; I might know; but if Austria is in the paper, then it is mischief; and maybe it would be murder; who knows?"

Claiborne looked frowningly from the paper to Oscar's tranquil eyes.

"Dick!" called Shirley from the hall, and she appeared in the doorway, drawing on her gloves; but paused at seeing Oscar.

"Shirley, I caught this man in the sheepfold. Did you ever see him before?"

"I think not, Dick."

"It was he that brought your horse home."

"To be sure it is! I hadn't recognized him. Thank you very much;" and she smiled at Oscar.

Dick frowned fiercely and referred again to the paper.

"Where is Monsieur Chauvenet—have you any idea?"

"If he isn't at the hotel or in Washington, I'm sure I don't know. If we are going to the dance—"

"Plague the dance! I heard a shot in the sheep pasture a bit ago and ran out to find this fellow in a row with another man, who got away."

"I heard the shot and the dogs from my window. You seem to have been in a fuss, too, from the looks of your clothes;" and Shirley sat down and smoothed her gloves with provoking coolness.

Dick sent Oscar to the far end of the library with a gesture, and held up the message for Shirley to read.

"Don't touch it!" he exclaimed; and when she nodded her head in sign that she had read it, he said, speaking earnestly and rapidly:

"I suppose I have no right to hold this message; I must send the man to the hotel telegraph office with it. But where is Chauvenet? What is his business in the valley? And what is the link between Vienna and these hills?"

"Don't you know what *you* are doing here?" she asked, and he flushed.

"I know what, but not *why!*" he blurted irritably; "but that's enough!"

"You know that Baron von Marhof wants to find Mr. John Armitage; but you don't know why."

"I have my orders and I'm going to find him, if it takes ten years."

Shirley nodded and clasped her fingers together. Her elbows resting on the high arms of her chair caused her cloak to flow sweepingly away from her shoulders. At the end of the room, with his back to the portières, stood Oscar, immovable. Claiborne reexamined the message, and extended it again to Shirley.

"There's no doubt of that being Chauvenet's writing, is there?"

"I think not, Dick. I have had notes from him now and then in that hand. He has taken pains to write this with unusual distinctness."

The color brightened in her cheeks suddenly as she looked toward Oscar. The curtains behind him swayed, but so did the curtain back of her. A May-time languor had crept into the heart of April, and all the windows were open. The blurred murmurs of insects stole

into the house. Oscar, half-forgotten by his captor, heard a sound in the window behind him and a hand touched him through the curtain.

Claiborne crumpled the paper impatiently.

"Shirley, you are against me! I believe you have seen Armitage here, and I want you to tell me what you know of him. It is not like you to shield a scamp of an adventurer—an unknown, questionable character. He has followed you to this valley and will involve you in his affairs without the slightest compunction, if he can. It's most infamous, outrageous, and when I find him I'm going to thrash him within an inch of his life before I turn him over to Marhof!"

Shirley laughed for the first time in their interview, and rose and placed her hands on her brother's shoulders.

"Do it, Dick! He's undoubtedly a wicked, a terribly wicked and dangerous character."

"I tell you I'll find him," he said tensely, putting up his hands to hers, where they rested on his shoulders. She laughed and kissed him, and when her hands fell to her side the message was in her gloved fingers.

"I'll help you, Dick," she said, buttoning her glove.

"That's like you, Shirley."

"If you want to find Mr. Armitage—"

"Of course I want to find him—" His voice rose to a roar.

"Then turn around; Mr. Armitage is just behind you!"

"Yes; I needed my man for other business," said Armitage, folding his arms, "and as you were very much occupied I made free with the rear veranda and changed places with him."

Claiborne walked slowly toward him, the anger glowing in his face.

"You are worse than I thought—eavesdropper, house-breaker!"

"Yes; I am both those things, Captain Claiborne. But I am also in a great hurry. What do you want with me?"

"You are a rogue, an impostor—"

"We will grant that," said Armitage quietly. "Where is your warrant for my arrest?"

"That will be forthcoming fast enough! I want you to understand that I have a personal grievance against you."

"It must wait until day after to-morrow, Captain

Claiborne. I will come to you here or wherever you say on the day after to-morrow."

Armitage spoke with a deliberate sharp decision that was not the tone of a rogue or a fugitive. As he spoke he advanced until he faced Claiborne in the center of the room. Shirley still stood by the window, holding the soiled paper in her hand. She had witnessed the change of men at the end of the room; it had touched her humor; it had been a joke on her brother; but she felt that the night had brought a crisis: she could not continue to shield a man of whom she knew nothing save that he was the object of a curious enmity. Her idle prayer that her own land's commonplace sordidness might be obscured by the glamour of Old World romance came back to her; she had been in touch with an adventure that was certainly proving fruitful of diversion. The *coup de théâtre* by which Armitage had taken the place of his servant had amused her for a moment; but she was vexed and angry now that he had dared come again to the house.

"You are under arrest, Mr. Armitage; I must detain you here," said Claiborne.

"In America—in free Virginia—without legal process?" asked Armitage, laughing.

"You are a housebreaker, that is enough. Shirley, please go!"

"You were not detached from the army to find a housebreaker. But I will make your work easy for you—day after to-morrow I will present myself to you wherever you say. But now—that cable message which my man found in your sheep pasture is of importance. I must trouble you to read it to me."

"No!" shouted Claiborne.

Armitage drew a step nearer.

"You must take my word for it that matters of importance, of far-reaching consequence, hang upon that message. I must know what it is."

"You certainly have magnificent cheek! I am going to take that paper to Baron von Marhof at once."

"Do so!—but I must know first! Baron von Marhof and I are on the same side in this business, but he doesn't understand it, and it is clear you don't. Give me the message!"

He spoke commandingly, his voice thrilling with earnestness, and jerked out his last words with angry impatience. At the same moment he and Claiborne stepped toward each other, with their hands clenched at their sides.

"I don't like your tone, Mr. Armitage!"

"I don't like to use that tone, Captain Claiborne."

Shirley walked quickly to the table and put down the message. Then, going to the door, she paused as though by an afterthought, and repeated quite slowly the words:

"Winkelried—Vienna—not later than Friday—Chauvenet."

"Shirley!" roared Claiborne.

John Armitage bowed to the already vacant doorway; then bounded into the hall out upon the veranda and ran through the garden to the side gate, where Oscar waited.

Half an hour later Captain Claiborne, after an interview with Baron von Marhof, turned his horse toward the hills.

CHAPTER XXII

THE PRISONER AT THE BUNGALOW

So, exultant of heart, with front toward the bridges of battle,
Sat they the whole night long, and the fires that they kindled were many.
E'en as the stars in her train, with the moon as she walketh in splendor,
Blaze forth bright in the heavens on nights when the welkin is breathless,
Nights when the mountain peaks, their jutting cliffs, and the valleys,
All are disclosed to the eye, and above them the fathomless ether
Opens to star after star, and glad is the heart of the shepherd—
Such and so many the fires 'twixt the ships and the streams of the Xanthus
Kept ablaze by the Trojans in front of the darkening city.
Over the plains were burning a thousand fires, and beside them
Each sat fifty men in the firelight glare; and the horses,
Champing their fodder and barley white, and instant for action,
Stood by the chariot-side and awaited the glory of morning.

The Iliad: Translation of Prentiss Cummings.

"In Vienna, Friday!"

"There should be great deeds, my dear Jules;" and