

CHAPTER XXIII

THE VERGE OF MORNING

O to mount again where erst I haunted;
Where the old red hills are bird-enchanted,
And the low green meadows
Bright with sward;
And when even dies, the million-tinted,
And the night has come, and planets glinted,
Lo! the valley hollow,
Lamp-bestarr'd.

—R. L. S.

"I hope you like my things, Captain Claiborne!"

Armitage stood a little in advance, his hand on Oscar's arm to check the rush of the little man.

Claiborne sheathed the sword, placed it on the table and folded his arms.

"Yes; they are very interesting."

"And those ribbons and that cloak,—I assure you they are of excellent quality. Oscar, put a blanket on this gentleman's horse. Then make some coffee and wait."

As Oscar closed the door, Armitage crossed to the

table, flung down his gauntlets and hat and turned to Claiborne.

"I didn't expect this of you; I really didn't expect it. Now that you have found me, what in the devil do you want?"

"I don't know—I'll be *damned* if I know!" and Claiborne grinned, so that the grotesque lines of his soiled countenance roused Armitage's slumbering wrath.

"You'd better find out damned quick! This is my busy night and if you can't explain yourself I'm going to tie you hand and foot and drop you down the well till I finish my work. Speak up! What are you doing on my grounds, in my house, at this hour of the night, prying into my affairs and rummaging in my trunks?"

"I didn't *come* here, Armitage; I was brought—with a potato sack over my head. There's the sack on the floor, and any of its dirt that isn't on my face must be permanently settled in my lungs."

"What are you doing up here in the mountains—why are you not at your station? The potato-sack story is pretty flimsy. Do better than that and hurry up!"

"Armitage"—as he spoke, Claiborne walked to the table and rested his finger-tips on it—"Armitage, you and I have made some mistakes during our short ac-

quaintance. I will tell you frankly that I have blown hot and cold about you as I never did before with another man in my life. On the ship coming over and when I met you in Washington I thought well of you. Then your damned cigarette case shook my confidence in you there at the Army and Navy Club that night; and now—"

"Damn my cigarette case!" bellowed Armitage, clapping his hand to his pocket to make sure of it.

"That's what I say! But it was a disagreeable situation,—you must admit that."

"It was, indeed!"

"It requires some nerve for a man to tell a circumstantial story like that to a tableful of gentlemen, about one of the gentlemen!"

"No doubt of it whatever, Mr. Claiborne."

Armitage unbuttoned his coat, and jerked back the lapels impatiently.

"And I knew as much about Monsieur Chauvenet as I did about you, or as I do about you!"

"What you know of him, Mr. Claiborne, is of no consequence. And what you don't know about me would fill a large volume. How did you get here, and what do you propose doing, now that you are here? I am in a

hurry and have no time to waste. If I can't get anything satisfactory out of you within two minutes I'm going to chuck you back into the sack."

"I came up here in the hills to look for you—you—you—! Do you understand?" began Claiborne angrily. "And as I was riding along the road about two miles from here I ran into three men on horseback. When I stopped to parley with them and find out what they were doing, they crept up on me and grabbed my horse and put that sack over my head. They had mistaken me for you; and they brought me here, into your house, and pulled the sack off and were decidedly disagreeable at finding they had made a mistake. One of them had gone in to ransack your effects and when they pulled off the bag and disclosed the wrong hare, he dropped his loot on the floor; and then I told them to go to the devil, and I hope they've done it! When you came in I was picking up your traps, and I submit that the sword is handsome enough to challenge anybody's eye. And there's all there is of the story, and I don't care a damn whether you believe it or not."

Their eyes were fixed upon each other in a gaze of anger and resentment. Suddenly, Armitage's tense fig-

ure relaxed; the fierce light in his eyes gave way to a gleam of humor and he laughed long and loud.

"Your face—your face, Claiborne; it's funny. It's too funny for any use. When your teeth show it's something ghastly. For God's sake go in there and wash your face!"

He made a light in his own room and plied Claiborne with towels, while he continued to break forth occasionally in fresh bursts of laughter. When they went into the hall both men were grave.

"Claiborne—"

Armitage put out his hand and Claiborne took it in a vigorous clasp.

"You don't know who I am or what I am; and I haven't got time to tell you now. It's a long story; and I have much to do, but I swear to you, Claiborne, that my hands are clean; that the game I am playing is no affair of my own, but a big thing that I have pledged myself to carry through. I want you to ride down there in the valley and keep Marhof quiet for a few hours; tell him I know more of what's going on in Vienna than he does, and that if he will only sit in a rocking-chair and tell you fairy stories till morning, we can all be

happy. Is it a bargain—or—must I still hang your head down the well till I get through?"

"Marhof may go to the devil! He's a lot more mysterious than even you, Armitage. These fellows that brought me up here to kill me in the belief that I was you can not be friends of Marhof's cause."

"They are not; I assure you they are not! They are blackguards of the blackest dye."

"I believe you, Armitage."

"Thank you. Now your horse is at the door—run along like a good fellow."

Armitage dived into his room, caught up a cartridge belt and reappeared buckling it on.

"Oscar!" he yelled, "bring in that coffee—with cups for two."

He kicked off his boots and drew on light shoes and leggings.

"Light marching orders for the rough places. Confound that buckle."

He rose and stamped his feet to settle the shoes.

"Your horse is at the door; that rascal Oscar will take off the blanket for you. There's a bottle of fair whisky in the cupboard, if you'd like a nip before starting. Bless me! I forgot the coffee! There on the table, Os-

car, and never mind the chairs," he added as Oscar came in with a tin pot and the cups on a piece of plank.

"I'm taking the rifle, Oscar; and be sure those revolvers are loaded with the real goods."

There was a great color in Armitage's face as he strode about preparing to leave. His eyes danced with excitement, and between the sentences that he jerked out half to himself he whistled a few bars from a comic opera that was making a record run on Broadway. His steps rang out vigorously from the bare pine floor.

"Watch the windows, Oscar; you may forgive a general anything but a surprise—isn't that so, Claiborne?—and those fellows must be pretty mad by this time. Excuse the coffee service, Claiborne. We always pour the sugar from the paper bag—original package, you understand. And see if you can't find Captain Claiborne a hat, Oscar—"

With a tin-cup of steaming coffee in his hand he sat on the table dangling his legs, his hat on the back of his head, the cartridge belt strapped about his waist over a brown corduroy hunting-coat. He was in a high mood, and chaffed Oscar as to the probability of their breakfasting another morning. "If we die, Oscar, it shall be in a good cause!"



"Excuse the coffee service, Claiborne" Page 320

He threw aside his cup with a clatter, jumped down and caught the sword from the table, examined it critically, then sheathed it with a click.

Claiborne had watched Armitage with a growing impatience; he resented the idea of being thus ignored; then he put his hand roughly on Armitage's shoulder.

Armitage, intent with his own affairs, had not looked at Claiborne for several minutes, but he glanced at him now as though just recalling a duty.

"Lord, man! I didn't mean to throw you into the road! There's a clean bed in there that you're welcome to—go in and get some sleep."

"I'm not going into the valley," roared Claiborne, "and I'm not going to bed; I'm going with you, damn you!"

"But bless your soul, man, you can't go with me; you are as ignorant as a babe of my affairs, and I'm terribly busy and have no time to talk to you. Oscar, that coffee scalded me. Claiborne, if only I had time, you know, but under existing circumstances—"

"I repeat that I'm going with you. I don't know why I'm in this row, and I don't know what it's all about, but I believe what you say about it; and I want you to understand that I can't be put in a bag like a prize

potato without taking a whack at the man who put me there."

"But if you should get hurt, Claiborne, it would spoil my plans. I never could face your family again," said Armitage earnestly. "Take your horse and go."

"I'm going back to the valley when you do."

"Humph! Drink your coffee! Oscar, bring out the rest of the artillery and give Captain Claiborne his choice."

He picked up his sword again, flung the blade from the scabbard with a swish, and cut the air with it, humming a few bars of a German drinking-song. Then he broke out with:

"I do not think a braver gentleman,
More active-valliant or more valiant-young,
More daring or more bold, is now alive
To grace this latter age with noble deeds.
For my part, I may speak it to my shame,
I have a truant been to chivalry;—"

"Lord, Claiborne, you don't know what's ahead of us! It's the greatest thing that ever happened. I never expected anything like this—not on my cheerfulest days. Dearest Jules is out looking for a telegraph office to pull off the Austrian end of the rumpus. Well, little good it will do him! And we'll catch him and Durand and that

Servian devil and lock them up here till Marhof decides what to do with him. We're off!"

"All ready, sir;" said Oscar briskly.

"It's half-past two. They didn't get off their message at Lamar, because the office is closed and the operator gone, and they will keep out of the valley and away from the big inn, because they are rather worried by this time and not anxious to get too near Marhof. They've probably decided to go to the next station below Lamar to do their telegraphing. Meanwhile they haven't got me!"

"They had me and didn't want me," said Claiborne, mounting his own horse.

"They'll have a good many things they don't want in the next twenty-four hours. If I hadn't enjoyed this business so much myself we might have had some secret service men posted all along the coast to keep a lookout for them. But it's been a great old lark. And now to catch them!"

Outside the preserve they paused for an instant.

"They're not going to venture far from their base, which is that inn and post-office, where they have been rummaging my mail. I haven't studied the hills for nothing, and I know short cuts about here that are not on maps. They haven't followed the railroad north, because the valley broadens too much and there are too

many people. There's a trail up here that goes over the ridge and down through a wind gap to a settlement about five miles south of Lamar. If I'm guessing right, we can cut around and get ahead of them and drive them back here to my land."

"To the Port of Missing Men! It was made for the business," said Claiborne.

"Oscar, patrol the road here, and keep an eye on the bungalow, and if you hear us forcing them down, charge from this side. I'll fire twice when I get near the Port to warn you; and if you strike them first, give the same signal. Do be careful, Sergeant, how you shoot. We want prisoners, you understand, not corpses."

Armitage found a faint trail, and with Claiborne struck off into the forest near the main gate of his own grounds. In less than an hour they rode out upon a low-wooded ridge and drew up their panting, sweating horses—two shadowy videttes against the lustral dome of stars. A keen wind whistled across the ridge and the horses pawed the unstable ground restlessly. The men jumped down to tighten their saddle-girths, and they turned up their coat collars before mounting again.

"Come! We're on the verge of morning," said Armitage, "and there's no time to lose."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE ATTACK IN THE ROAD

Cowards and laggards fall back; but alert to the saddle,
Straight, grim and abreast, vault our weather-worn galloping
legion,
With a stirrup-cup each to the one gracious woman that
loves him.

—*Louise Imogen Guiney.*

"There's an abandoned lumber camp down here, if I'm not mistaken, and if we've made the right turns we ought to be south of Lamar and near the railroad."

Armitage passed his rein to Claiborne and plunged down the steep road to reconnoiter.

"It's a strange business," Claiborne muttered half-aloud.

The cool air of the ridge sobered him, but he reviewed the events of the night without regret. Every young officer in the service would envy him this adventure. At military posts scattered across the continent men whom he knew well were either abroad on duty, or slept the sleep of peace. He lifted his eyes to the paling