

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

stars. Before long bugle and morning gun would announce the new day at points all along the seaboard. His West Point comrades were scattered far, and the fancy seized him that the bugle brought them together every day of their lives as it sounded the morning calls that would soon begin echoing down the coast from Kennebec Arsenal and Fort Preble in Maine, through Myer and Monroe, to McPherson, in Georgia, and back through Niagara and Wayne to Sheridan, and on to Ringgold and Robinson and Crook, zigzagging back and forth over mountain and plain to the Pacific, and thence ringing on to Alaska, and echoing again from Hawaii to lonely outposts in Asian seas.

He was so intent with the thought that he hummed reveille, and was about to rebuke himself for unsoldierly behavior on duty when Armitage whistled for him to advance.

"It's all right; they haven't passed yet. I met a railroad track-walker down there and he said he had seen no one between here and Lamar. Now they're handicapped by the big country horse they had to take for that Servian devil, and we can push them as hard as we like. We must get them beyond Lamar before we crowd them; and don't forget that we want to drive them into

my land for the round-up. I'm afraid we're going to have a wet morning."

They rode abreast beside the railroad through the narrow gap. A long freight-train rumbled and rattled by, and a little later they passed a coal shaft, where a begrimed night shift loaded cars under flaring torches.

"Their message to Winkelried is still on this side of the Atlantic," said Armitage; "but Winkelried is in a strong room by this time, if the existing powers at Vienna are what they ought to be. I've done my best to get him there. The message would only help the case against him if they sent it."

Claiborne groaned mockingly.

"I suppose I'll know what it's all about when I read it in the morning papers. I like the game well enough, but it might be more amusing to know what the devil I'm fighting for."

"You enlisted without reading the articles of war, and you've got to take the consequences. You've done what you set out to do—you've found me; and you're traveling with me over the Virginia mountains to report my capture to Baron von Marhof. On the way you are going to assist in another affair that will be equally to your credit; and then if all goes well with us I'm going

to give myself the pleasure of allowing Monsieur Chauvenet to tell you exactly who I am. The incident appeals to my sense of humor—I assure you I have one! Of course, if I were not a person of very great distinction Chauvenet and his friend Durand would not have crossed the ocean and brought with them a professional assassin, skilled in the use of smothering and knifing, to do away with me. You are in luck to be alive. We are dangerously near the same size and build—and in the dark—on horseback—”

“That was funny. I knew that if I ran for it they’d plug me for sure, and that if I waited until they saw their mistake they would be afraid to kill me. Ugh! I still taste the red soil of the Old Dominion.”

“Come, Captain! Let us give the horses a chance to prove their blood. These roads will be paste in a few hours.”

The dawn was breaking sullenly, and out of a gray, low-hanging mist a light rain fell in the soft, monotonous fashion of mountain rain. Much of the time it was necessary to maintain single file; and Armitage rode ahead. The fog grew thicker as they advanced; but they did not lessen their pace, which had now dropped to a steady trot.

Suddenly, as they swept on beyond Lamar, they heard the beat of hoofs and halted.

“Bully for us! We’ve cut in ahead of them! Can you count them, Claiborne?”

“There are three horses all right enough, and they’re forcing the beasts. What’s the word?”

“Drive them back! Ready—here we go!” roared Armitage in a voice intended to be heard.

They yelled at the top of their voices as they charged, plunging into the advancing trio after a forty-yard gallop.

“Not later than Friday—back you go!” shouted Armitage, and laughed aloud at the enemy’s rout. One of the horses—it seemed from its rider’s yells to be Chauvenet’s—turned and bolted, and the others followed back the way they had come.

Soon they dropped their pace to a trot, but the trio continued to fly before them.

“They’re rattled,” said Claiborne, “and the fog isn’t helping them any.”

“We’re getting close to my place,” said Armitage; and as he spoke two shots fired in rapid succession cracked faintly through the fog and they jerked up their horses.

"It's Oscar! He's a good way ahead, if I judge the shots right."

"If he turns them back we ought to hear their horses in a moment," observed Claiborne. "The fog muffles sounds. The road's pretty level in here."

"We must get them out of it and into my territory for safety. We're within a mile of the gate and we ought to be able to crowd them into that long open strip where the fences are down. Damn the fog!"

The agreed signal of two shots reached them again, but clearer, like drum-taps, and was immediately answered by scattering shots. A moment later, as the two riders moved forward at a walk, a sharp volley rang out quite clearly and they heard shouts and the crack of revolvers again.

"By George! They're coming—here we go!"

They put their horses to the gallop and rode swiftly through the fog. The beat of hoofs was now perfectly audible ahead of them, and they heard, quite distinctly, a single revolver snap twice.

"Oscar has them on the run—bully for Oscar! They're getting close—thank the Lord for this level stretch—now howl and let 'er go!"

They went forward with a yell that broke weirdly and

chokingly on the gray cloak of fog, their horses' hoofs pounding dully on the earthen road. The rain had almost ceased, but enough had fallen to soften the ground.

"They're terribly brave or horribly scared, from their speed," shouted Claiborne. "Now for it!"

They rose in their stirrups and charged, yelling lustily, riding neck and neck toward the unseen foe, and with their horses at their highest pace they broke upon the mounted trio that now rode upon them grayly out of the mist.

There was a mad snorting and shrinking of horses. One of the animals turned and tried to bolt, and his rider, struggling to control him, added to the confusion. The fog shut them in with each other; and Armitage and Claiborne, having flung back their own horses at the onset, had an instant's glimpse of Chauvenet trying to swing his horse into the road; of Zmai half-turning, as his horse reared, to listen for the foe behind; and of Durand's impassive white face as he steadied his horse with his left hand and leveled a revolver at Armitage with his right.

With a cry Claiborne put spurs to his horse and drove him forward upon Durand. His hand knocked the leveled revolver flying into the fog. Then Zmai fired twice,

and Chauvenet's frightened horse, panic-stricken at the shots, reared, swung round and dashed back the way he had come, and Durand and Zmai followed.

The three disappeared into the mist, and Armitage and Claiborne shook themselves together and quieted their horses.

"That was too close for fun—are you all there?" asked Armitage.

"Still in it; but Chauvenet's friend won't miss every time. There's murder in his eye. The big fellow seemed to be trying to shoot his own horse."

"Oh, he's a knife and sack man and clumsy with the gun."

They moved slowly forward now and Armitage sent his horse across the rough ditch at the roadside to get his bearings. The fog seemed at the point of breaking, and the mass about them shifted and drifted in the growing light.

"This is my land, sure enough. Lord, man, I wish you'd get out of this and go home. You see they're an ugly lot and don't use toy pistols."

"Remember the potato sack! That's my watchword," laughed Claiborne.

They rode with their eyes straight ahead, peering

through the breaking, floating mist. It was now so clear and light that they could see the wood at either hand, though fifty yards ahead in every direction the fog still lay like a barricade.

"I should value a change of raiment," observed Armitage. "There was an advantage in armor—your duds might get rusty on a damp excursion, but your shirt wouldn't stick to your hide."

"Who cares? Those devils are pretty quiet, and the little sergeant is about due to bump into them again."

They had come to a gradual turn in the road at a point where a steep, wooded incline swept up on the left. On the right lay the old hunting preserve and Armitage's bungalow. As they drew into the curve they heard a revolver crack twice, as before, followed by answering shots and cries and the thump of hoofs.

"Ohee! Oscar has struck them again. Steady now! Watch your horse!" And Armitage raised his arm high above his head and fired twice as a warning to Oscar.

The distance between the contending parties was shorter now than at the first meeting, and Armitage and Claiborne bent forward in their saddles, talking softly to their horses, that had danced wildly at Armitage's shots.

"Lord! if we can crowd them in here now and back to the Port!"

"There!"

Exclamations died on their lips at the instant. Ahead of them lay the fog, rising and breaking in soft folds, and behind it men yelled and several shots snapped spitefully on the heavy air. Then a curious picture disclosed itself just at the edge of the vapor, as though it were a curtain through which actors in a drama emerged upon a stage. Zmai and Chauvenet flashed into view suddenly, and close behind them, Oscar, yelling like mad. He drove his horse between the two men, threw himself flat as Zmai fired at him, and turned and waved his hat and laughed at them; then, just before his horse reached Claiborne and Armitage, he checked its speed abruptly, flung it about and then charged back, still yelling, upon the amazed foe.

"He's crazy—he's gone clean out of his head!" muttered Claiborne, restraining his horse with difficulty. "What do you make of it?"

"He's having fun with them. He's just rattling them to warm himself up—the little beggar. I didn't know it was in him."

Back went Oscar toward the two horsemen he had

passed less than a minute before, still yelling, and this time he discharged his revolver with seeming unconcern for the value of ammunition, and as he again dashed between them, and back through the gray curtain, Armitage gave the word, and he and Claiborne swept on at a gallop.

Durand was out of sight, and Chauvenet turned and looked behind him uneasily; then he spoke sharply to Zmai. Oscar's wild ride back and forth had demoralized the horses, which were snorting and plunging wildly. As Armitage and Claiborne advanced Chauvenet spoke again to Zmai and drew his own revolver.

"Oh, for a saber now!" growled Claiborne.

But it was not a moment for speculation or regret. Both sides were perfectly silent as Claiborne, leading slightly, with Armitage pressing close at his left, galloped toward the two men who faced them at the gray wall of mist. They bore to the left with a view of crowding the two horsemen off the road and into the preserve, and as they neared them they heard cries through the mist and rapid hoof-beats, and Durand's horse leaped the ditch at the roadside just before it reached Chauvenet and Zmai and ran away through the rough

underbrush into the wood, Oscar close behind and silent now, grimly intent on his business.

The revolvers of Zmai and Chauvenet cracked together, and they, too, turned their horses into the wood, and away they all went, leaving the road clear.

"My horse got it that time!" shouted Claiborne.

"So did I," replied Armitage; "but never you mind, old man, we've got them cornered now."

Claiborne glanced at Armitage and saw his right hand, still holding his revolver, go to his shoulder.

"Much damage?"

"It struck a hard place, but I am still fit."

The blood streamed from the neck of Claiborne's horse, which threw up its head and snorted in pain, but kept bravely on at the trot in which Armitage had set the pace.

"Poor devil! We'll have a reckoning pretty soon," cried Armitage cheerily. "No kingdom is worth a good horse!"

They advanced at a trot toward the Port.

"You'll be afoot any minute now, but we're in good shape and on our own soil, with those carrion between us and a gap they won't care to drop into! I'm off for

the gate—you wait here, and if Oscar fires the signal, give the answer."

Armitage galloped off to the right and Claiborne jumped from his horse just as the wounded animal trembled for a moment, sank to its knees and rolled over dead.