

## CHAPTER XXV

### THE PORT OF MISSING MEN

Fast they come, fast they come;  
See how they gather!  
Wide waves the eagle plume,  
Blended with heather.  
Cast your plaids, draw your blades,  
Forward each man set!  
Pibroch of Donuil Dhu  
Knell for the onset!

—*Sir Walter Scott.*

Claiborne climbed upon a rock to get his bearings, and as he gazed off through the wood a bullet sang close to his head and he saw a man slipping away through the underbrush a hundred yards ahead of him. He threw up his rifle and fired after the retreating figure, jerked the lever spitefully and waited. In a few minutes Oscar rode alertly out of the wood at his left.

"It was better for us a dead horse than a dead man—yes?" was the little sergeant's comment. "We shall come back for the saddle and bridle."

"Humph! Where do you think those men are?"

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"Behind some rocks near the edge of the gap. It is a poor position."

"I'm not sure of that. They'll escape across the old bridge."

"*Nein.* A sparrow would shake it down. Three men at once—they would not need our bullets!"

Far away to the right two reports in quick succession gave news of Armitage.

"It's the signal that he's got between them and the gate. Swing around to the left and I will go straight to the big clearing, and meet you."

"You will have my horse—yes?" Oscar began to dismount.

"No; I do well enough this way. Forward!—the word is to keep them between us and the gap until we can sit on them."

The mist was fast disappearing and swirling away under a sharp wind, and the sunlight broke warmly upon the drenched world. Claiborne started through the wet undergrowth at a dog trot. Armitage, he judged, was about half a mile away, and to make their line complete Oscar should traverse an equal distance. The soldier blood in Claiborne warmed at the prospect of a definite contest. He grinned as it occurred to him

that he had won the distinction of having a horse shot under him in an open road fight, almost within sight of the dome of the Capitol.

The brush grew thinner and the trees fewer, and he dropped down and crawled presently to the shelter of a boulder, from which he could look out upon the open and fairly level field known as the Port of Missing Men. There as a boy he had dreamed of battles as he pondered the legend of the Lost Legion. At the far edge of the field was a fringe of stunted cedars, like an abatis, partly concealing the old barricade where, in the golden days of their youth, he had played with Shirley at storming the fort; and Shirley, in these fierce assaults, had usually tumbled over upon the imaginary enemy ahead of him!

As he looked about he saw Armitage, his horse at a walk, ride slowly out of the wood at his right. Claiborne jumped up and waved his hat and a rifle-ball flicked his coat collar as lightly as though an unseen hand had tried to brush a bit of dust from it. As he turned toward the marksman behind the cedars three shots, fired in a volley, hummed about him. Then it was very still, with the Sabbath stillness of early morning in the hills, and he heard faintly the mechanical click and snap of the

rifles of Chauvenet's party as they expelled their exploded cartridges and refilled their magazines.

"They're really not so bad—bad luck to them!" he muttered. "I'll be ripe for the little brown men after I get through with this;" and Claiborne laughed a little and watched Armitage's slow advance out into the open.

The trio behind the barricade had not yet seen the man they had crossed the sea to kill, as the line of his approach closely paralleled the long irregular wall with its fringe of cedars; but they knew from Claiborne's signal that he was there. The men had picketed their horses back of the little fort, and Claiborne commended their good generalship and wondered what sort of beings they were to risk so much upon so wild an adventure.

Armitage rode out farther into the opening, and Claiborne, with his eyes on the barricade, saw a man lean forward through the cedars in an effort to take aim at the horseman. Claiborne drew up his own rifle and blazed away. Bits of stone spurted into the air below the target's elbow, and the man dropped back out of sight without firing.

"I've never been the same since that fever," growled

Claiborne, and snapped out the shell spitefully, and watched for another chance.

Being directly in front of the barricade, he was in a position to cover Armitage's advance, and Oscar, meanwhile, had taken his cue from Armitage and ridden slowly into the field from the left. The men behind the cedars fired now from within the enclosure at both men without exposing themselves; but their shots flew wild, and the two horsemen rode up to Claiborne, who had emptied his rifle into the cedars and was reloading.

"They are all together again, are they?" asked Armitage, pausing a few yards from Claiborne's rock, his eyes upon the barricade.

"The gentleman with the curly hair—I drove him in. He is a damned poor shot—yes?"

Oscar tightened his belt and waited for orders, while Armitage and Claiborne conferred in quick pointed sentences.

"Shall we risk a rush or starve them out? I'd like to try hunger on them," said Armitage.

"They'll all sneak off over the bridge to-night if we pen them up. If they all go at once they'll break it down, and we'll lose our quarry. But you want to capture them—alive?"

"I certainly do!" Armitage replied, and turned to laugh at Oscar, who had fired at the barricade from the back of his horse, which was resenting the indignity by trying to throw his rider.

The enemy now concentrated a sharp fire upon Armitage, whose horse snorted and pawed the ground as the balls cut the air and earth.

"For God's sake, get off that horse, Armitage!" bawled Claiborne, rising upon the rock. "There's no use in wasting yourself that way."

"My arm aches and I've got to do something. Let's try storming them just for fun. It's a cavalry stunt, Claiborne, and you can play being the artillery that's supporting our advance. Fall away there, Oscar, about forty yards, and we'll race for it to the wall and over. That barricade isn't as stiff as it looks from this side—I know all about it. There are great chunks out of it that can't be seen from this side."

"Thank me for that, Armitage. I tumbled down a good many yards of it when I played up here as a kid. Get off that horse, I tell you! You've got a hole in you now! Get down!"

"You make me tired, Claiborne. This beautiful row will all be over in a few minutes. I never intended to

waste much time on those fellows when I got them where I wanted them."

His left arm hung quite limp at his side and his face was very white. He had dropped his rifle in the road at the moment the ball struck his shoulder, but he still carried his revolver. He nodded to Oscar, and they both galloped forward over the open ground, making straight for the cedar covert.

Claiborne was instantly up and away between the two riders. Their bold advance evidently surprised the trio beyond the barricade, who shouted hurried commands to one another as they distributed themselves along the wall and awaited the onslaught. Then they grew still and lay low out of sight as the silent riders approached. The hoofs of the onrushing horses rang now and then on the harsh outcropping rock, and here and there struck fire. Armitage sat erect and steady in his saddle, his horse speeding on in great bounds toward the barricade. His lips moved in a curious stiff fashion, as though he were ill, muttering:

"For Austria! For Austria! He bade me do something for the Empire!"

Beyond the cedars the trio held their fire, watching

with fascinated eyes the two riders, every instant drawing closer, and the runner who followed them.

"They can't jump this—they'll veer off before they get here," shouted Chauvenet to his comrades. "Wait till they check their horses for the turn."

"We are fools. They have got us trapped;" and Durand's hands shook as he restlessly fingered a revolver. The big Servian crouched on his knees near by, his finger on the trigger of his rifle. All three were hatless and unkempt. The wound in Zmai's scalp had broken out afresh, and he had twisted a colored handkerchief about it to stay the bleeding. A hundred yards away the waterfall splashed down the defile and its faint murmur reached them. A wild dove rose ahead of Armitage and flew straight before him over the barricade. The silence grew tense as the horses galloped nearer; the men behind the cedar-lined wall heard only the hollow thump of hoofs and Claiborne's voice calling to Armitage and Oscar, to warn them of his whereabouts.

But the eyes of the three conspirators were fixed on Armitage; it was his life they sought; the others did not greatly matter. And so John Armitage rode across the little plain where the Lost Legion had camped for a year at the end of a great war; and as he rode on the

defenders of the boulder barricade saw his white face and noted the useless arm hanging and swaying, and felt, in spite of themselves, the strength of his tall erect figure.

Chauvenet, watching the silent rider, said aloud, speaking in German, so that Zmai understood:

"It is in the blood; he is like a king."

But they could not hear the words that John Armitage kept saying over and over again as he crossed the field:

"He bade me do something for Austria—for Austria!"

"He is brave, but he is a great fool. When he turns his horse we will fire on him," said Zmai.

Their eyes were upon Armitage; and in their intentness they failed to note the increasing pace of Oscar's horse, which was spurting slowly ahead. When they saw that he would first make the sweep which they assumed to be the contemplated strategy of the charging party, they leveled their arms at him, believing that he must soon check his horse. But on he rode, bending forward a little, his rifle held across the saddle in front of him.

"Take him first," cried Chauvenet. "Then be ready for Armitage!"

Oscar was now turning his horse, but toward them and across Armitage's path, with the deliberate purpose of taking the first fire. Before him rose the cedars that concealed the line of wall; and he saw the blue barrels of the waiting rifles. With a great spurt of speed he cut in ahead of Armitage swiftly and neatly; then on, without a break or a pause—not heeding Armitage's cries—on and still on, till twenty, then ten feet lay between him and the wall, at a place where the cedar barrier was thinnest. Then, as his horse crouched and rose, three rifles cracked as one. With a great crash the horse struck the wall and tumbled, rearing and plunging, through the tough cedar boughs. An instant later, near the same spot, Armitage, with better luck clearing the wall, was borne on through the confused line. When he flung himself down and ran back Clai-borne had not yet appeared.

Oscar had crashed through at a point held by Durand, who was struck down by the horse's forefeet. He lay howling with pain, with the hind quarters of the prostrate beast across his legs. Armitage, running back toward the wall, kicked the revolver from his hand and

left him. Zmai had started to run as Oscar gained the wall and Chauvenet's curses did not halt the Servian when he found Oscar at his heels.

Chauvenet stood impassively by the wall, his revolver raised and covering Armitage, who walked slowly and doggedly toward him. The pallor in Armitage's face gave him an unearthly look; he appeared to be trying to force himself to a pace of which his wavering limbs were incapable. At the moment that Claiborne sprang upon the wall behind Chauvenet Armitage swerved and stumbled, then swayed from side to side like a drunken man. His left arm swung limp at his side, and his revolver remained undrawn in his belt. His gray felt hat was twitched to one side of his head, adding a grotesque touch to the impression of drunkenness, and he was talking aloud:

"Shoot me, Mr. Chauvenet. Go on and shoot me! I am John Armitage, and I live in Montana, where real people are. Go on and shoot! Winkelried's in jail and the jig's up and the Empire and the silly King are safe. Go on and shoot, I tell you!"

He had stumbled on until he was within a dozen steps of Chauvenet, who lifted his revolver until it covered Armitage's head.

"Drop that gun—drop it damned quick!" and Dick Claiborne swung the butt of his rifle high and brought it down with a crash on Chauvenet's head; then Armitage paused and glanced about and laughed.

It was Claiborne who freed Durand from the dead horse, which had received the shots fired at Oscar the moment he rose at the wall. The fight was quite knocked out of the conspirator, and he swore under his breath, cursing the unconscious Chauvenet and the missing Zmai and the ill fortune of the fight.

"It's all over but the shouting—what's next?" demanded Claiborne.

"Tie him up—and tie the other one up," said Armitage, staring about queerly. "Where the devil is Oscar?"

"He's after the big fellow. You're badly fussed, old man. We've got to get out of this and fix you up."

"I'm all right. I've got a hole in my shoulder that feels as big and hot as a blast-furnace. But we've got them nailed, and it's all right, old man!"

Durand continued to curse things visible and invisible as he rubbed his leg, while Claiborne watched him impatiently.

"If you start to run I'll certainly kill you, Monsieur."

"We have met, my dear sir, under unfortunate circumstances. You should not take it too much to heart about the potato sack. It was the fault of my dear colleagues. Ah, Armitage, you look rather ill, but I trust you will harbor no harsh feelings."

Armitage did not look at him; his eyes were upon the prostrate figure of Chauvenet, who seemed to be regaining his wits. He moaned and opened his eyes.

"Search him, Claiborne, to make sure. Then get him on his legs and pinion his arms, and tie the gentlemen together. The bridle on that dead horse is quite the thing."

"But, Messieurs," began Durand, who was striving to recover his composure—"this is unnecessary. My friend and I are quite willing to give you every assurance of our peaceable intentions."

"I don't question it," laughed Claiborne.

"But, my dear sir, in America, even in delightful America, the law will protect the citizens of another country."

"It will, indeed," and Claiborne grinned, put his revolver into Armitage's hand, and proceeded to cut the

reins from the dead horse. "In America such amiable scoundrels as you are given the freedom of cities, and little children scatter flowers in their path. You ought to write for the funny papers, Monsieur."

"I trust your wounds are not serious, my dear Armitage—"

Armitage, sitting on a boulder, turned his eyes wearily upon Durand, whose wrists Claiborne was knotting together with a strap. The officer spun the man around viciously.

"You beast, if you address Mr. Armitage again I'll choke you!"

Chauvenet, sitting up and staring dully about, was greeted ironically by Durand:

"Prisoners, my dearest Jules; prisoners, do you understand? Will you please arrange with dear Armitage to let us go home and be good?"

Claiborne emptied the contents of Durand's pockets upon the ground and tossed a flask to Armitage.

"We will discuss matters at the bungalow. They always go to the nearest farm-house to sign the treaty of peace. Let us do everything according to the best traditions."

A moment later Oscar ran in from the direction of the gap, to find the work done and the party ready to leave.

"Where is the Servian?" demanded Armitage.

The soldier saluted, glanced from Chauvenet to Durand, and from Claiborne to Armitage.

"He will not come back," said the sergeant quietly.

"That is bad," remarked Armitage. "Take my horse and ride down to Storm Springs and tell Baron von Marhof and Judge Claiborne that Captain Claiborne has found John Armitage, and that he presents his compliments and wishes them to come to Mr. Armitage's house at once. Tell them that Captain Claiborne sent you and that he wants them to come back with you immediately."

"But Armitage—not Marhof—for God's sake, not Marhof." Chauvenet staggered to his feet and his voice choked as he muttered his appeal. "Not Marhof!"

"We can fix this among ourselves—just wait a little, till we can talk over our affairs. You have quite the wrong impression of us, I assure you, Messieurs," protested Durand.

"That is your misfortune! Thanks for the brandy, Monsieur Durand. I feel quite restored," said Armi-

tage, rising; and the color swept into his face and he spoke with quick decision.

"Oh, Claiborne, will you kindly give me the time?"

Claiborne laughed. It was a laugh of real relief at the change in Armitage's tone.

"It's a quarter of seven. This little scrap didn't take as much time as you thought it would."

Oscar had mounted Armitage's horse and Claiborne stopped him as he rode past on his way to the road.

"After you deliver Mr. Armitage's message, get a doctor and tell him to be in a hurry about getting here."

"No!" began Armitage. "Good Lord, no! We are not going to advertise this mess. You will spoil it all. I don't propose to be arrested and put in jail, and a doctor would blab it all. I tell you, no!"

"Oscar, go to the hotel at the Springs and ask for Doctor Bledsoe. He's an army surgeon on leave. Tell him I want him to bring his tools and come to me at the bungalow. Now go!"

The conspirators' horses were brought up and Claiborne put Armitage upon the best of them.

"Don't treat me as though I were a sick priest! I tell you, I feel bully! If the prisoners will kindly walk

ahead of us, we'll graciously ride behind. Or we might put them both on one horse! Forward!"

Chauvenet and Durand, as they marched ahead of their captors, divided the time between execrating each other and trying to make terms with Armitage. The thought of being haled before Baron von Marhof gave them great concern.

"Wait a few hours, Armitage—let us sit down and talk it all over. We're not as black as your imagination paints us!"

"Save your breath! You've had your fun so far, and now I'm going to have mine. You fellows are all right to sit in dark rooms and plot murder and treason; but you're not made for work in the open. Forward!"

They were a worn company that drew up at the empty bungalow, where the lamp and candles flickered eerily. On the table still lay the sword, the cloak, the silver box, the insignia of noble orders.

## CHAPTER XXVI

"WHO ARE YOU, JOHN ARMITAGE?"

"*Morbleu, Monsieur, you give me too much majesty,*" said the Prince.—*The History of Henry Esmond.*

"These gentlemen doubtless wish to confer—let them sequester themselves!" and Armitage waved his hand to the line of empty sleeping-rooms. "I believe Monsieur Durand already knows the way about—he may wish to explore my trunks again," and Armitage bowed to the two men, who, with their wrists tied behind them and a strap linking them together, looked the least bit absurd.

"Now, Claiborne, that foolish Oscar has a first-aid kit of some sort that he used on me a couple of weeks ago. Dig it out of his simple cell back there and we'll clear up this mess in my shoulder. Twice on the same side,—but I believe they actually cracked a bone this time."

He lay down on a long bench and Claiborne cut off his coat.