

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.

"I'd like to hold a little private execution for this," growled the officer. "A little lower and it would have caught you in the heart."

"Don't be spiteful! I'm as sound as wheat. We have them down and the victory is ours. The great fun is to come when the good Baron von Marhof gets here. If I were dying I believe I could hold on for that."

"You're not going to die, thank God! Just a minute more until I pack this shoulder with cotton. I can't do anything for that smashed bone, but Bledsoe is the best surgeon in the army, and he'll fix you up in a jiffy."

"That will do now. I must have on a coat when our honored guests arrive, even if we omit one sleeve—yes, I guess we'll have to, though it does seem a bit affected. Dig out the brandy bottle from the cupboard there in the corner, and then kindly brush my hair and straighten up the chairs a bit. You might even toss a stick on the fire. That potato sack you may care to keep as a souvenir."

"Be quiet, now! Remember, you are my prisoner, Mr. Armitage."

"I am, I am! But I will wager ten courses at Sherry's the Baron will be glad to let me off."

He laughed softly and began repeating:



With their wrists tied behind them, they looked the least bit absurd Page 356

"Why, hear you, my masters: was it for me to kill the heir apparent? Should I turn upon the true prince? Why, thou knowest I am as valiant as Hercules; but beware instinct; the lion will not touch the true prince. Instinct is a great matter; I was a coward on instinct. I shall think the better of myself and thee during my life; I for a valiant lion, and thou for a true prince.'"

Claiborne forced him to lie down on the bench, and threw a blanket over him, and in a moment saw that he slept. In an inner room the voices of the prisoners occasionally rose shrilly as they debated their situation and prospects. Claiborne chewed a cigar and watched and waited. Armitage wakened suddenly, sat up and called to Claiborne with a laugh:

"I had a perfectly bully dream, old man. I dreamed that I saw the ensign of Austria-Hungary flying from the flag-staff of this shanty; and by Jove, I'll take the hint! We owe it to the distinguished Ambassador who now approaches to fly his colors over the front door. We ought to have a trumpeter to herald his arrival—but the white and red ensign with the golden crown—it's in the leather-covered trunk in my room—the one with the most steamer labels on it—go bring it, Clai-

borne, and we'll throw it to the free airs of Virginia. And be quick—they ought to be here by this time!"

He stood in the door and watched Claiborne haul up the flag, and he made a mockery of saluting it as it snapped out in the fresh morning air.

"The Port of Missing Men! It was designed to be extra-territorial, and there's no treason in hauling up an alien flag," and his high spirits returned, and he stalked back to the fireplace, chaffing Claiborne and warning him against ever again fighting under an unknown banner.

"Here they are," called Claiborne, and flung open the door as Shirley, her father and Baron von Marhof rode up under the billowing ensign. Dick stepped out to meet them and answer their questions.

"Mr. Armitage is here. He has been hurt and we have sent for a doctor; but"—and he looked at Shirley.

"If you will do me the honor to enter—all of you!" and Armitage came out quickly and smiled upon them.

"We had started off to look for Dick when we met your man," said Shirley, standing on the steps, rein in hand.

"What has happened, and how was Armitage injured?" demanded Judge Claiborne.

"There was a battle," replied Dick, grinning, "and Mr. Armitage got in the way of a bullet."

Her ride through the keen morning air had flooded Shirley's cheeks with color. She wore a dark blue skirt and a mackintosh with the collar turned up about her neck, and a red scarf at her throat matched the band of her soft felt hat. She drew off her gauntlets and felt in her pocket for a handkerchief with which to brush some splashes of mud that had dried on her cheek, and the action was so feminine, and marked so abrupt a transition from the strange business of the night and morning, that Armitage and Dick laughed and Judge Claiborne turned upon them frowningly.

Shirley had been awake much of the night. On returning from the ball at the inn she found Dick still absent, and when at six o'clock he had not returned she called her father and they had set off together for the hills, toward which, the stablemen reported, Dick had ridden. They had met Oscar just outside the Springs, and had returned to the hotel for Baron von Marhof. Having performed her office as guide and satisfied herself that Dick was safe, she felt her conscience eased, and

could see no reason why she should not ride home and leave the men to their council. Armitage saw her turn to her horse, whose nose was exploring her mackintosh pockets, and he stepped quickly toward her.

"You see, Miss Claiborne, your brother is quite safe, but I very much hope you will not run away. There are some things to be explained which it is only fair you should hear."

"Wait, Shirley, and we will all go down together," said Judge Claiborne reluctantly.

Baron von Marhof, very handsome and distinguished, but mud-splashed, had tied his horse to a post in the driveway, and stood on the veranda steps, his hat in his hand, staring, a look of bewilderment on his face. Armitage, bareheaded, still in his riding leggings, his trousers splashed with mud, his left arm sleeveless and supported by a handkerchief swung from his neck, shook hands with Judge Claiborne.

"Baron von Marhof, allow me to present Mr. Armitage," said Dick, and Armitage walked to the steps and bowed. The Ambassador did not offer his hand.

"Won't you please come in?" said Armitage, smiling upon them, and when they were seated he took his stand

by the fireplace, hesitated a moment, as though weighing his words, and began:

"Baron von Marhof, the events that have led to this meeting have been somewhat more than unusual—they are unique. And complications have arisen which require prompt and wise action. For this reason I am glad that we shall have the benefit of Judge Claiborne's advice."

"Judge Claiborne is the counsel of our embassy," said the Ambassador. His gaze was fixed intently on Armitage's face, and he hitched himself forward in his chair impatiently, grasping his crop nervously across his knees.

"You were anxious to find me, Baron, and I may have seemed hard to catch, but I believe we have been working at cross-purposes to serve the same interests."

The Baron nodded.

"Yes, I dare say," he remarked dryly.

"And some other gentlemen, of not quite your own standing, have at the same time been seeking me. It will give me great pleasure to present one of them—one, I believe, will be enough. Mr. Claiborne, will you kindly allow Monsieur Jules Chauvenet to stand in the door for a moment? I want to ask him a question."

Shirley, sitting farthest from Armitage, folded her hands upon the long table and looked toward the door into which her brother vanished. Then Jules Chauvenet stood before them all, and as his eyes met hers for a second the color rose to his face, and he broke out angrily:

"This is infamous! This is an outrage! Baron von Marhof, as an Austrian subject, I appeal to you for protection from this man!"

"Monsieur, you shall have all the protection Baron von Marhof cares to give you; but first I wish to ask you a question—just one. You followed me to America with the fixed purpose of killing me. You sent a Servian assassin after me—a fellow with a reputation for doing dirty work—and he tried to stick a knife into me on the deck of the *King Edward*. I shall not recite my subsequent experiences with him or with you and Monsieur Durand. You announced at Captain Claiborne's table at the Army and Navy Club in Washington that I was an impostor, and all the time, Monsieur, you have really believed me to be some one—some one in particular."

Armitage's eyes glittered and his voice faltered with intensity as he uttered these last words. Then he thrust his hand into his coat pocket, stepped back, and concluded:

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"Who am I, Monsieur?"

Chauvenet shifted uneasily from one foot to another under the gaze of the five people who waited for his answer; then he screamed shrilly:

"You are the devil—an impostor, a liar, a thief!"

Baron von Marhof leaped to his feet and roared at Chauvenet in English:

"Who is this man? Whom do you believe him to be?"

"Answer and be quick about it!" snapped Claiborne.

"I tell you"—began Chauvenet fiercely.

"Who am I?" asked Armitage again.

"I don't know who you are—"

"You do not! You certainly do not!" laughed Armitage; "but whom have you believed me to be, Monsieur?"

"I thought—"

"Yes; you thought—"

"I thought—there seemed reasons to believe—"

"Yes; and you believe it; go on!"

Chauvenet's eyes blinked for a moment as he considered the difficulties of his situation. The presence of Baron von Marhof sobered him. America might not, after all, be so safe a place from which to conduct an Old World conspiracy, and this incident must, if possi-

ble, he turned to his own account. He addressed the Baron in German:

"This man is a designing plotter; he is bent upon mischief and treason; he has contrived an attempt against the noble ruler of our nation—he is a menace to the throne—"

"Who is he?" demanded Marhof impatiently; and his eyes and the eyes of all fell upon Armitage.

"I tell you we found him lurking about in Europe, waiting his chance, and we drove him away—drove him here to watch him. See these things—that sword—those orders! They belonged to the Archduke Karl. Look at them and see that it is true! I tell you we have rendered Austria a high service. One death—one death—at Vienna—and this son of a madman would be king! He is Frederick Augustus, the son of the Archduke Karl!"

The room was very still as the last words rang out. The old Ambassador's gaze clung to Armitage; he stepped nearer, the perspiration breaking out upon his brow, and his lips trembled as he faltered:

"He would be king; he would be king!"

Then Armitage spoke sharply to Claiborne.

"That will do. The gentleman may retire now."

As Claiborne thrust Chauvenet out of the room, Armitage turned to the little company, smiling.

"I am not Frederick Augustus, the son of the Archduke Karl," he said quietly; "nor did I ever pretend that I was, except to lead those men on in their conspiracy. The cigarette case that caused so much trouble at Mr. Claiborne's supper-party belongs to me. Here it is."

The old Ambassador snatched it from him eagerly.

"This device—the falcon poised upon a silver helmet! You have much to explain, Monsieur."

"It is the coat-of-arms of the house of Schomburg. The case belonged to Frederick Augustus, Karl's son; and this sword was his; and these orders and that cloak lying yonder—all were his. They were gifts from his father. And believe me, my friends, I came by them honestly."

The Baron bent over the table and spilled the orders from their silver box and scanned them eagerly. The colored ribbons, the glittering jewels, held the eyes of all. Many of them were the insignia of rare orders no longer conferred. There were the crown and pendant cross of the Invincible Knights of Zaringer; the white falcon upon a silver helmet, swung from a ribbon of

cloth of gold—the familiar device of the house of Schomburg, the gold Maltese cross of the Chevaliers of the Blessed Sacrament; the crossed swords above an iron crown of the Ancient Legion of Saint Michael and All Angels; and the full-rigged ship pendant from triple anchors—the decoration of the rare Spanish order of the Star of the Seven Seas. Silence held the company as the Ambassador's fine old hands touched one after another. It seemed to Shirley that these baubles again bound the New World, the familiar hills of home, the Virginia shores, to the wallowing caravels of Columbus.

The Ambassador closed the silver box the better to examine the white falcon upon its lid. Then he swung about and confronted Armitage.

"Where is he, Monsieur?" he asked, his voice sunk to a whisper, his eyes sweeping the doors and windows.

"The Archduke Karl is dead; his son Frederick Augustus, whom these conspirators have imagined me to be—he, too, is dead."

"You are quite sure—you are quite sure, Mr. Armitage?"

"I am quite sure."

"That is not enough! We have a right to ask more than your word!"

"No, it is not enough," replied Armitage quietly. "Let me make my story brief. I need not recite the peculiarities of the Archduke—his dislike of conventional society, his contempt for sham and pretense. After living a hermit life at one of the smallest and most obscure of the royal estates for several years, he vanished utterly. That was fifteen years ago."

"Yes; he was mad—quite mad," blurted the Baron.

"That was the common impression. He took his oldest son and went into exile. Conjectures as to his whereabouts have filled the newspapers sporadically ever since. He has been reported as appearing in the South Sea Islands, in India, in Australia, in various parts of this country. In truth he came directly to America and established himself as a farmer in western Canada. His son was killed in an accident; the Archduke died within the year."

Judge Claiborne bent forward in his chair as Armitage paused.

"What proof have you of this story, Mr. Armitage?"

"I am prepared for such a question, gentlemen. His identity I may establish by various documents which he gave me for the purpose. For greater security I locked them in a safety box of the Bronx Loan and Trust

Company in New York. To guard against accidents I named you jointly with myself as entitled to the contents of that box. Here is the key."

As he placed the slim bit of steel on the table and stepped back to his old position on the hearth, they saw how white he was, and that his hand shook, and Dick begged him to sit down.

"Yes; will you not be seated, Monsieur?" said the Baron kindly.

"No; I shall have finished in a moment. The Archduke gave those documents to me, and with them a paper that will explain much in the life of that unhappy gentleman. It contains a disclosure that might in certain emergencies be of very great value. I beg of you, believe that he was not a fool, and not a madman. He sought exile for reasons—for the reason that his son Francis, who has been plotting the murder of the new Emperor-king, *is not his son!*"

"What!" roared the Baron.

"It is as I have said. The faithlessness of his wife, and not madness, drove him into exile. He intrusted that paper to me and swore me to carry it to Vienna if Francis ever got too near the throne. It is certified by half a dozen officials authorized to administer oaths in

Canada, though they, of course, never knew the contents of the paper to which they swore him. He even carried it to New York and swore to it there before the consul-general of Austria-Hungary in that city. There was a certain grim humor in him; he said he wished to have the affidavit bear the seal of his own country, and the consul-general assumed that it was a document of mere commercial significance."

The Baron looked at the key; he touched the silver box; his hand rested for a moment on the sword.

"It is a marvelous story—it is wonderful! Can it be true—can it be true?" murmured the Ambassador.

"The documents will be the best evidence. We can settle the matter in twenty-four hours," said Judge Claiborne.

"You will pardon me for seeming incredulous, sir," said the Baron, "but it is all so extraordinary. And these men, these prisoners—"

"They have pursued me under the impression that I am Frederick Augustus. Oddly enough, I, too, am Frederick Augustus," and Armitage smiled. "I was within a few months of his age, and I had a little brush with Chauvenet and Durand in Geneva in which they captured my cigarette case—it had belonged to Freder-

ick, and the Archduke gave it to me—and my troubles began. The Emperor-king was old and ill; the disorders in Hungary were to cloak the assassination of his successor; then the Archduke Francis, Karl's reputed son, was to be installed upon the throne."

"Yes; there has been a conspiracy; I—"

"And there have been conspirators! Two of them are safely behind that door; and, somewhat through my efforts, their chief, Winkelried, should now be under arrest in Vienna. I have had reasons, besides my pledge to Archduke Karl, for taking an active part in these affairs. A year ago I gave Karl's repudiation of his second son to Count Ferdinand von Stroebel, the prime minister. The statement was stolen from him for the Winkelried conspirators by these men we now have locked up in this house."

The Ambassador's eyes blazed with excitement as these statements fell one by one from Armitage's lips; but Armitage went on:

"I trust that my plan for handling these men will meet with your approval. They have chartered the *George W. Custis*, a fruit-carrying steamer lying at Morgan's wharf in Baltimore, in which they expected to make off after they had finished with me. At one

time they had some idea of kidnapping me; and it isn't my fault they failed at that game. But I leave it to you, gentlemen, to deal with them. I will suggest, however, that the presence just now in the West Indies, of the cruiser *Sophia Margaret*, flying the flag of Austria-Hungary, may be suggestive."

He smiled at the quick glance that passed between the Ambassador and Judge Claiborne.

Then Baron von Marhof blurted out the question that was uppermost in the minds of all.

"Who are *you*, John Armitage?"

And Armitage answered, quite simply and in the quiet tone that he had used throughout:

"I am Frederick Augustus von Stroebel, the son of your sister and of the Count Ferdinand von Stroebel. The Archduke's son and I were school-fellows and play-mates; you remember as well as I my father's place near the royal lands. The Archduke talked much of democracy and the New World, and used to joke about the divine right of kings. Let me make my story short—I found out their plan of flight and slipped away with them. It was believed that I had been carried away by gipsies."

"Yes, that is true; it is all true! And you never saw your father—you never went to him?"

"I was only thirteen when I ran away with Karl. When I appeared before my father in Paris last year he would have sent me away in anger, if it had not been that I knew matters of importance to Austria—Austria, always Austria!"

"Yes; that was quite like him," said the Ambassador. "He served his country with a passionate devotion. He hated America—he distrusted the whole democratic idea. It was that which pointed his anger against you—that you should have chosen to live here."

"Then when I saw him at Geneva—that last interview—he told me that Karl's statement had been stolen, and he had his spies abroad looking for the thieves. He was very bitter against me. It was only a few hours before he was killed, as a part of the Winkelried conspiracy. He had given his life for Austria. He told me never to see him again—never to claim my own name until I had done something for Austria. And I went to Vienna and knelt in the crowd at his funeral, and no one knew me, and it hurt me, oh, it hurt me to know that he had grieved for me; that he had wanted a son

to carry on his own work, while I had grown away from the whole idea of such labor as his. And now—"

He faltered, his hoarse voice broke with stress of feeling, and his pallor deepened.

"It was not my fault—it was really not my fault! I did the best I could, and, by God, I've got them in the room there where they can't do any harm!—and Dick Claiborne, you are the finest fellow in the world, and the squarest and bravest, and I want to take your hand before I go to sleep; for I'm sick—yes, I'm sick—and sleepy—and you'd better haul down that flag over the door—it's treason, I tell you!—and if you see Shirley, tell her I'm John Armitage—tell her I'm John Armitage, John Arm—"

The room and its figures rushed before his eyes, and as he tried to stand erect his knees crumpled under him, and before they could reach him he sank to the floor with a moan. As they crowded about he stirred slightly, sighed deeply, and lay perfectly still.