

# THE PORT OF MISSING MEN

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## Chapter XXI

THE COMEDY OF A SHEEPFOLD.

SCAR'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 reins under a clump of wild cherry trees at the roadside and waited. Several hundred yards away lay the Claiborne sheepfold, with a broad pasture riding 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."

Zmal 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 he clattered 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. Zmal 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."

Zmal 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.

Zmal 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. "Begone!" 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 Zmal 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 Zmal was not anxious to penetrate closer to the Claiborne house, whose garden extended quite near. He met Zmal promptly and again thrust him back.

"It is a message—yes?" asked Oscar.

"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 behind the wall as Zmal 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 Zmal, now a blur on the startled sheep pasture.

The slope was gradual and a pretty feature of the landscape by day, but it

closed 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 his 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 at the sheep in language unbecoming an officer and a gentleman.

"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 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 thrashing about by the broken pen door.

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

Zmal 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 bounds 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 letter—give me the letter!" commanded Oscar.

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.

wandered 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 kennel.

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

Zmal 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 averted 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 dogtrot, and Oscar was closing upon him rapidly; then, quite near the sheds, Zmal 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 bounds at the stables answered the report.

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

"Oscar! I want the letter!" shouted Oscar in German. The man turned slowly, although 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 stablemen to quiet the dogs, snatched a lantern and ran a way through the pergola to the end of the garden and thence into the pasture beyond. Meanwhile Oscar, thinking Zmal 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. Zmal averted 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 stary 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 man 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

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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



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"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.  
Winklerfeld, Vienna.  
Not later than Friday.

CHAUVENET.

Claiborne read and reread 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 do not 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 M. 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 portieres, stood Oscar, immovable. Claiborne re-examined 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.

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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.

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

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, housebreaker!"

"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.

"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."

"I must wait until day after tomorrow, Captain Claiborne. I will come to you here or wherever you say on the day after tomorrow."

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 the men at the end of the room. It had touched her humor. 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. The coup de theatre 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—after tomorrow 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 clinched 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:

"Winklerfeld—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.

"N Vienna, Friday!"

"There should be great deeds, my dear Jules!" And M. Durand adjusted the wick of a smoking lamp that hung suspended from the ceiling of a room of the inn, store and postoffice at Lamar.

"Meanwhile, this being but Wednesday, we have our work to do."

"Which is not so simple, after all, as one studies the situation. Mr. Armitage is here, quite within reach. We suspect him of being a person of distinction. He evinces unusual interest in a certain document that was once in your hands."

"Our own hands, if you would be accurate."

"You are captious. But, granted so, we must get them back. The gentleman is dwelling in a bungalow on the mountain side for greater convenience in watching events and wooing the lady of his heart's desire. We employed a clumsy clown to put him out of the world, but he dies hard, and now we have got to get rid of him. But if he hasn't the papers on his clothes then you have this pleasant scheme for kidnapping him, getting him down to your steamer at Baltimore and cruising with him until he is ready to come to terms. The American air has done much for your imagination, my dear Jules; has overestimated it."

"You are not the fool you look, my dear Durand. You have actually taken a fair grasp of the situation."

"But the adorable young lady, the fair Mlle. Claiborne—that becomes of her in these transactions?"

"That is none of your affair," replied Chauvenet, frowning. "I am quite content with my progress. I have not finished in that matter."

"Neither, it would seem, has Mr. John Armitage. But I am quite well satisfied to leave it to you. In a few days we shall know much more than we do now. I should be happier if you were in charge in Vienna. A false step there—ugh! I hesitate to think of the wretched mess there would be."

"Trust Winklerfeld to do his full duty. You must not forget that the acute Stroebel now sleeps the long sleep and that many masses have already been said for the repose of his intrepid soul."

"The splendor of our undertaking is enough to draw his ghost from the grave. Ugh! By this time Zmal should have filed our cablegram at the Springs and got your mail at the hotel. I hope you have not misplaced your confidence in the operator there. Coming back our giant must pass Armitage's house."

"Trust him to pass it. His encounters with Armitage have not been to his credit."

The two men were dressed in rough clothes, as for an outing, and in spite of the habitual trifling tone of their talk they wore a serious air. Durand's eyes danced with excitement, and he twisted his mustache nervously. Chauvenet had gone to Washington to meet Durand, to get from him news of the progress of the conspiracy in Vienna and, not least, to berate him for crossing the Atlantic. "I do not require watching, my dear Durand," he had said.

"A man in love, dearest Jules, sometimes forgets." But they had gone into the Virginia hills amicably and were quartered with the postmaster. They waited now for Zmal, whom they had sent to the Springs with a message and to get Chauvenet's mail. Armitage, they had learned, used the Lamar telegraph office, and they had decided to carry their business elsewhere.