

The Port of Missing Men.

By Meredith Nicholson,
Author of "The House of a Thousand Candles."
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Chapter XII

A CAMP IN THE MOUNTAINS. HE study of maps and time tables is a far more profitable business than appears. John Armitage possessed a great store of geographical knowledge as interpreted in such literature. He could tell you without leaving his room and probably without opening his trunk the quickest way out of Tokyo or St. Petersburg or Calcutta or Clinch Tight, Mont., if you suddenly received a cablegram calling you to Vienna or Paris or Washington from one of those places.

Such being the case, it was remarkable that he should have started for a point in the Virginia hills by way of Boston, thence to Norfolk by coastwise steamer and on to Lamar by lines of railroad whose schedules would have been the despair of unhardened travelers. He had expressed his trunks direct and traveled with two suit cases and an umbrella. His journey since his boat swung out into Massachusetts bay had been spent in gloomy speculations, and two young women booked for Baltimore wrongly attributed his reticence and aloofness to a grievous disappointment in love.

He had wanted time to think—to ponder his affairs—to devise some way out of his difficulties and to contrive the defeat of Chauvenet. Moreover, his relations to the Claibornes were in an ugly tangle. Chauvenet had dealt him a telling blow in a quarter where he particularly wished to appear to advantage.

He jumped out of the day coach in which he had accomplished the last stage of his journey to Lamar just at dawn and found Oscar, with two horses, waiting.

"Good morning," said Oscar, saluting.

"You are prompt, sergeant." And Armitage shook hands with him.

"As the train roared on through the valley Armitage opened one of the suit cases and took out a pair of leather leggings, which he strapped on. Then Oscar tied the cases together with a rope and hung them across his saddle bow.

"The place—what of it?" asked Armitage.

"There may be worse. I have not decided."

Armitage laughed aloud.

"Is it as bad as that?"

The man was busy tightening the saddle girths, and he answered Armitage's further questions with soldier-like brevity.

"You have been here—"

"Two weeks, sir."

"And nothing has happened? It is a good report."

"It is good for the soul to stand on mountains and look at the world. You will like that animal—yes? He is lighter than a cavalry horse. Mine, you will notice, is a trifle heavier. I bought them at a stock farm in another valley and rode them up to the place."

The train sent back loud echoes. A girl in a pink sunbonnet rode up on a mule and carried off the mail pouch. The station agent was busy inside at his telegraph instruments and paid no heed to the horsemen. Save for a few huts clustered on the hillside there were no signs of human habitation in sight. The lights in a switch target showed yellow against the growing dawn.

"I am quite ready, sir," reported Oscar, touching his hat. "There is nothing here but the station. The settlement is farther on our way."

"Then let us be off," said Armitage, swinging into the saddle.

Oscar led the way in silence along a narrow road that clung close to the base of a great pine covered hill. The morning was sharp and the horses stepped smartly, the breath of their

the gallop and rode ahead to shake up his blood.

"It is good," said the stolid cavalryman as Armitage wheeled again into line with him.

"Yes, it is good," repeated Armitage. A peace descended upon him that he had not known in many days. The light grew as the sun rose higher, blazing upon them like a brazen target through deep clefts in the mountains. The morning mists retreated before them to farther ridges and peaks, and the beautiful gray-blue of the Virginia hills delighted Armitage's eyes. The region was very wild. Here and there from some mountaineer's cabin a light penciling of smoke stole upward.

They once passed a boy driving a yoke of steers. After several miles the road, that had hung midway of the rough hill, dipped down sharply, and they came out into another and broader valley, where there were tilled farms and a little settlement with a blacksmith shop and a country store, postoffice and inn combined.

The storekeeper stood in the door smoking a cob pipe. Seeing Oscar, he went inside and brought out some letters and newspapers, which he delivered to him in silence.

"This is Lamar postoffice," announced Oscar.

"There must be some mail here for me," said Armitage.

Oscar handed him several long envelopes—the bore the name of the Bronx Loan and Trust company, whose office in New York was his permanent address, and he opened and read a number of letters and cablegrams that had been forwarded. Their contents evidently gave him satisfaction, for he whistled cheerfully as he thrust them into his pocket.

"You keep in touch with the world, do you, Oscar? It is commendable."

"I take a Washington paper. It relieves the monotony, and I can see where the regiments are moving and whether my old captain is yet out of the hospital and what happened to my lieutenant in his court martial about the pay accounts. One must observe the world—yes. At the postoffice back there—he jerked his head to indicate—"it is against the law to sell whisky in a postoffice, so that storekeeper with the red nose and small yellow eyes keeps it in a brown jug in the back room."

"To be sure," laughed Armitage. "I hope it is a good article."

"It is vile," replied Oscar. "His brother makes it up in the hills, and it is as strong as wood lye."

"Moonshine! I have heard of it. We must have some for rainy days."

It was a new world to John Armitage, and his heart was as light as the morning air as he followed Oscar along the ruddy mountain road. He was in Virginia, and somewhere on this soil, perhaps in some valley like the one through which he rode, Shirley Claiborne had gazed upon blue distances, with ridge rising against ridge, and dark pine covered slopes like these he saw for the first time. He had left his affairs in Washington in a sorry muddle, but he faced the new day with a buoyant spirit and did not trouble himself to look very far ahead. He had a definite business before him. His cablegrams were reassuring on that point. The fact that he was in a sense a fugitive did not trouble him in the least. He had no intention of allowing Jules Chauvenet's assassins to kill him or of being locked up in a Washington jail as the false Baron von Kissel. If he admitted that he was not John Armitage it would be difficult to prove that he was anybody else—a fact touching human testimony which Jules Chauvenet probably knew perfectly well.

On the whole, he was satisfied that he had followed the wisest course thus far. The broad panorama of the morning hills communicated to his spirit a growing elation. He began singing in German a ballad that recited the sorrows of a pale maiden prisoner in a dark tower on the Rhine, whence her true knight rescued her after many and fearsome adventures. On the last stave he ceased abruptly, and an exclamation of wonder broke from him.

They had been riding along a narrow trail that afforded, as Oscar said, a short cut across a long timbered ridge that lay between them and Armitage's property. The path was rough and steep, and the low hanging pine boughs and heavy underbrush increased the difficulties of ascent. Straining to the top, a new valley, hidden until now, was disclosed in long and beautiful vistas.

Armitage dropped the reins upon the neck of his panting horse.

"It is a fine valley—yes?" asked Oscar.

"It is a possession worthy of the noblest gods," replied Armitage. "There is a white building with colonnades away over there. Is it the house of the reigning deity?"

"It is not, sir," answered Oscar, who spoke English with a kind of dogged precision, giving equal value to all words. "It is a vast hotel where the rich spend much money. That place at the foot of the hills—do you see?—it is there they play a foolish game with sticks and little balls."

"Golf? Is it possible?"

"There is no doubt of it, sir. I have seen the fools myself—men and women. The place is called Storm Valley."

Armitage slapped his thigh sharply, so that his horse started.

"Yes; you are probably right, Oscar. I have heard of the place. And those houses that lie beyond there in the valley belong to gentlemen of taste and

leisure who drink the waters and ride horses and play the foolish game you describe with little white balls."

"I could not tell it better," responded Oscar, who had dismounted, like a good trooper, to rest his horse.

"And our place—is it below there?" demanded Armitage.

"It is not, sir. It lies to the west. But a man may come here when he is lonesome and look at the people and the gentlemen's houses. At night it is a pleasure to see the lights, and sometimes, when the wind is right, there is music of bands."

"Poor Oscar!" laughed Armitage.

His mood had not often in his life been so high.

On his flight northward from Washington and southward down the Atlantic capes, he thought that Shirley Claiborne and her family must now believe him an ignoble scoundrel had wrought misgivings and pain in his heart, but at least he would soon be near her—even now she might be somewhere below in the lovely valley, and he drew off his hat and stared down upon what was glorified and enchanted ground.

"Let us go," he said presently.

Oscar saluted, standing bridle in hand.

"You will find it easier to walk," he said, and, leading their horses, they retraced their steps for several hundred yards along the ridge, then mounted and proceeded slowly down again until they came to a mountain road. Presently a high wire fence followed at their right, where the descent was sharply arrested, and they came to a barred wooden gate, and beside it a small cabin, evidently designed for a lodge.

"This is the place, sir," and Oscar dismounted and threw open the gate.

The road within followed the rough contour of the hillside that still turned downward until it broadened into a wooded plateau. The flutter of wings in the underbrush, the scamper of squirrels, the mad lode of a fox, kept the eye busy. A deer broke out of a



Oscar dismounted and threw open the gate.

hazel thicket, stared at the horsemen in wide eyed amazement, then plunged into the wood and disappeared.

"There are deer and of foxes a great plenty," remarked Oscar.

He turned toward Armitage and added with lowered voice:

"It is different from our old hills and forests—yes? but sometimes I have been homesick."

"But this is not so bad, Oscar, and some day you shall go back?"

"Here," said the soldier, as they swung out of the wood and into the open, "is what they call the Port of Missing Men."

There was a broad park-like area that tended downward almost imperceptibly to a deep defile. They dismounted and walked to the edge and looked down the steep sides. A little creek flowed out of the wood and emptied itself with a silvery rush into the vale, caught its breath below and became a creek again. A slight suspension bridge flung across the defile had once afforded a short cut to Storm Springs, but it was now in disrepair, and at either end was posted "No Thoroughfare." Armitage stepped upon the loose planking and felt the frail thing vibrate under his weight.

"It is a bad place," remarked Oscar, as the bridge creaked and swung, and Armitage laughed and jumped back to solid ground.

The surface of this harbor of the hills was rough with outcropping rock. In some great stress of nature the trees had been destroyed utterly, and only a scant growth of weeds and wild flowers remained. The place suggested a battleground for the winds, where they might meet and struggle in wild combat, or, more practically, it was large enough for the evolutions of a squadron of cavalry.

"Why the name?" asked Armitage.

"There were gray soldiers of many battles—yes—who fought the long fight against the blue soldiers in the valley of Virginia, and after the war was over some of them would not surrender—no; but they marched here and stayed a long time and kept their last flag, and so the place was called the Port of Missing Men. They built that stone wall over there beyond the patch of cedars and camped.

And a few died, and their graves are there by the cedars. Yes; they had brave hearts," and Oscar lifted his hat as though he were saluting the lost legion.

They turned again to the road and went forward at a gallop, until, half a mile from the gate, they came upon a clearing and a low, red roofed bungalow.

"Your house,"

and Oscar swung himself down at the steps of a broad veranda. He led the horses away to a barn beyond the house, while Armitage surveyed the landscape. The bungalow stood on a rough knoll and was so placed as to afford a splendid view of a wide region. Armitage traversed the long veranda, studying the landscape and delimiting in the far stretching pine covered barricade of hills. He was aroused by Oscar, who appeared carrying the suit cases.

"There shall be breakfast," said the man.

He threw open the doors, and they entered a wide, bare hall, with a fireplace, into which Oscar dropped a match.

"All one floor—plenty of sleeping rooms, sir—a place to eat here—a kitchen beyond—a fair barracks for a common soldier; that is all."

"It is enough. Throw these bags into the nearest bedroom, if there is no choice, and camp will be established."

"This is yours. The baggage that came by express is there. A wagon goes with the place, and I brought the things up yesterday. There is a shower bath beyond the rear veranda. The mountain water is off the ice, but you will require hot water for shaving—is it not so?"

"You oppress me with luxuries, Oscar. Wind up the clock, and nothing will be wanting."

Oscar unstrapped the trunks and then stood at attention in the door. He had expected Armitage to condemn the place in bitter language, but the proprietor of the abandoned hunting preserve was in excellent spirits and whistled blithely as he drew out his keys.

"The place was built by fools," declared Oscar gloomily.

"Undoubtedly! There is a saying that fools build houses and wise men live in them. You see where that leaves us, Oscar. Let us be cheerful!"

He tried the shower and changed his raiment, while Oscar prepared coffee and laid a cloth on the long table before the fire. When Armitage appeared coffee steamed in the tin pot in which it had been made. Bacon, eggs and toast were further offered.

"You have done excellently well, Oscar. Go get your own breakfast." Armitage dropped a lump of sugar into his coffee cup and surveyed the room.

A large map of Virginia and a series of hunting prints hung on the untinted walls, and there were racks for guns, and a work bench at one end of the room where guns might be taken apart and cleaned. A few novels, several three-year-old magazines and a variety of pipes remained on the shelf above the fireplace. The house offered possibilities of meager comfort, and that was about all. Armitage remembered what the agent through whom he had made the purchase had said—that the place had proved too isolated for even a hunting preserve and that its only value was in the timber. He was satisfied with his bargain and would not set up a lumber mill yet awhile. He lighted a cigar and settled himself in an easy chair before the fire, glad of the luxury of peace and quiet after his circuitous journey and the tumult of doubt and question that had shaken him.

He slit the wrapper of the Washington newspaper that Oscar had brought from the mountain postoffice and scanned the headlines. He read with care a dispatch from London that purported to reflect the sentiment of the continental capitals toward Charles Louis, the new emperor-king of Austria-Hungary, and the paper dropped upon his knees, and he stared into the fire. Then he picked up a paper of earlier date and read all the foreign dispatches and the news of Washington. He was about to toss the paper aside when his eyes fell upon a boldly headlined article that caused his heart to throb fiercely.

It recited the sudden reappearance of the fraudulent Baron von Kissel in Washington and described in detail the baron's escapades at Bar Harbor and his later career in California and elsewhere. Then followed a story, veiled in careful phrases, but based, so the article recited, upon information furnished by a gentleman of extensive acquaintance on both sides of the Atlantic, that Baron von Kissel, under a new pseudonym and with even more daring effrontery, had within a fortnight sought to intrude himself in the most exclusive circles of Washington.

Armitage's cigar slipped from his fingers and fell upon the brick hearth as he read:

"The boldness of this clever adventurer is said to have reached a climax in this city within a few days. He had, under the name of Armitage, palmed himself off upon members of one of the most distinguished families of the capital, whom he had met abroad during the winter. A young gentleman of this family, who, it will suffice to say, bears a commission and title from the American government, entertained a small company of friends at a Washington club only a few nights ago, and this plausible adventurer was among the guests. He was recognized at once by one of the former's present, who, out of consideration for the host and fellow guests, held his tongue, but it is understood that this gentleman sought Armitage privately and warned him to leave Washington, which accounts for the fact that the sumptuous apartments at the New American in which Mr. John Armitage, alias Baron von Kissel, had established himself were vacated immediately. None of those present at the supper will talk of the matter, but it has been the subject of lively gossip for several days, and the German embassy is said to have laid before the Washington police all the information in its archives relating to the American adventures of this impudent scoundrel."

Armitage rose, dropped the paper

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into the fire, and, with his elbow resting on the mantel shelf, watched it burn. He laughed suddenly and faced about, his back to the flames. Oscar stood at attention in the middle of the room.

"Shall we unpack—yes?"

"It is a capital idea," said John Armitage.

"I was striker for my captain also, who had fourteen pairs of boots and a bad disposition—and his uniforms—yes? He was very pretty to look at on a horse."

"The ideal is paper into the fire," high, Oscar, but I shall do my best. That one first, please."

The contents of the two trunks were disposed of deftly by Oscar as Armitage directed. One of the bedrooms was utilized as a closet, and garments for every imaginable occasion were brought forth. There were stout English tweeds for the heaviest weather, two dress suits and Norfolk jackets in corduroy. The owner's taste ran to grays and browns, it seemed, and he whimsically ordered his raiment grouped by colors as he lounged about with a pipe in his mouth.

"You may hang those scarfs on the string provided by my predecessor, sergeant. They will help our color scheme. That pale blue doesn't blend well in our rainbow—put it in your pocket and wear it, with my compliments; and those tan shoes are not bad for the Virginia mud. Drop them here. Those gray campaign hats are comfortable. Give the oldest to me. And there is a riding cloak I had forgotten I ever owned. I gave gold for it to a Madrid tailor. The mountain nights are cool, and the thing may serve me well. Oscar, how far is it down to Storm Springs?"

"A forced march, and you are there in an hour and a half, sir."

(Continued next Saturday)

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He found Oscar, with two horses, waiting.

nostrils showing white on the air. The far roar and whistle of the train came back more and more faintly, and when it had quite ceased Armitage sighed, pushed his soft felt hat from his face and settled himself more firmly in his saddle. The keen air was as stimulating as wine, and he put his horse to



They came upon a red roofed bungalow.