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By Meredith Nicholson.

Author of "The House of a Thousand Candles."

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Chapter XIX

CAPTAIN CLAIBORNE ON DUTY.

IN some justification Captain Richard Claiborne packed a suitcase in his quarters at Fort Myer. Being a soldier, he obeyed orders; but, being human, he was also possessed of a degree of curiosity. He did not know just the series of incidents and conferences that preceded his summons to Washington, but they may be summarized thus:

Baron von Marhof was a cautious man. When the young gentlemen of his legation spoke to him in awed whispers of a cigarette case bearing an extraordinary device that had been seen in Washington he laughed them away; then, possessing a curious and thorough mind, he read all the press clippings relating to the false Baron von Kissel and studied the heraldic emblems of the Schomburgs. As he pondered he regretted the death of his eminent brother-in-law, Count Ferdinand von Stroebel, who was not a man to stumble over so negligible a trifle as a cigarette case. But Von Marhof himself was not without resources. He told the gentlemen of his suit that he had satisfied himself that there was nothing in the Armitage mystery; then he cabled Vienna discreetly for a few days and finally consulted Hilton Claiborne, the embassy's counsel, at the Claiborne home at Storm Springs.

They had both gone hurriedly to Washington, where they held a long conference with the secretary of state. Then the state department called the war department by telephone, and quickly down the line to the commanding officer at Fort Myer went a special assignment for Captain Claiborne to report to the secretary of state. A great deal of perfectly sound red tape was reduced to minute particles in these manipulations; it was also of a private and wholly confidential character. Therefore he returned to his cottage at Storm Springs, and the Washington papers stated that he was ill and had gone back to Virginia to take the waters.

The Claiborne home was the pleasant place in Storm valley and the library a comfortable place for a conference. Dick Claiborne caught the gravity of the older men as they unfolded to him the task for which they had asked his services. The baron stated the case in these words: "You know and have talked with this man Armitage; you saw the device on the cigarette case and asked an explanation, which he refused, and you know also Chauvenet, whom we suspect of complicity with the conspirators at home. Armitage is not the false Baron von Kissel. We have established that from Senator Sanderson beyond question. But Sanderson's knowledge of the man is of comparatively recent date, going back about five years to the time Armitage purchased his Montana ranch. Whoever Armitage may be, he pays his bills; he conducts himself like a gentleman; he travels at will, and people who meet him say a good word for him."

"He is an agreeable man and remarkably well posted in European politics," said Judge Claiborne. "I talked with him a number of times on the King Edward and must say that I liked him."

"Chauvenet evidently knows him. There was undoubtedly something back of that little trick at my supper party at the Army and Navy," said Dick.

"It might be explained"—began the baron; then he paused and looked from father to son. "Pardon me, but they both manifest some interest in Miss Claiborne."

"We met them abroad," said Dick, "and they both turned up again in Washington."

"One of them is here, or has been here in the valley—why not the other?" asked Judge Claiborne.

"But of course Shirley knows nothing of Armitage's whereabouts," Dick protested.

"Certainly not," declared his father.

"How did you make Armitage's acquaintance?" asked the ambassador.

"Some one must have been responsible for introducing him, if you can remember," Dick laughed.

"It was in the Monte Rosa at Geneva. Shirley and I had been chaffing each other about the persistence with which Armitage seemed to follow us. He was taking dejeuner at the same hour, and he passed us going out. Old Arthur Singleton—the ubiquitous—was talking to us, and he hailed Armitage with his customary zeal and introduced him to us in quite the usual American fashion. Later I asked Singleton who he was, and he knew nothing about him. Then Armitage turned up on the steamer, where he made himself most agreeable. Next, Senator Sanderson vouches for him as one of his Montana constituents. You know the rest of the story. I swallowed him whole. He called at our house on several occasions and came to the post, and I asked him to my supper for the

Spanish attache."

"And now, Dick, we want you to find him and get him into a room with ourselves, where we can ask him some questions," declared Judge Claiborne.

They discussed the matter in detail. It was agreed that Dick should remain at the Springs for a few days to watch Chauvenet; then if he got no clew to Armitage's whereabouts he was to go to Montana to see if anything could be learned there.

"We must find him. There must be no mistake about it," said the ambassador to Judge Claiborne when they were alone. "They are almost panic stricken in Vienna. What with the match burning close to the powder in Hungary and clever heads plotting in Vienna this American end of the game has dangerous possibilities."

"And when we have found Armitage"—the Judge began.

"Then we shall know the truth."

"But suppose—suppose—and Judge Claiborne glanced at the door—"suppose Charles Louis, emperor-king of Austria-Hungary, should die—tonight—tomorrow."

"We will assume nothing of the kind," ejaculated the ambassador sharply. "It is impossible." Then to Captain Claiborne: "You must pardon me if I do not explain further. I wish to find Armitage. It is of the greatest importance. It would not aid you if I told you why I must see and talk with him."

And as though to escape from the thing of which his counsel had hinted Baron von Marhof took his departure at once.

Shirley met her brother on the veranda. His arrival had been unheralded, and she was frankly astonished to see him.

"Well, Captain Claiborne, you are a man of mystery. You will undoubtedly be court martialed for deserting—and after a long leave too."

"I am on duty. Don't forget that you are the daughter of a diplomat."

"Humph! It doesn't follow necessarily that I should be stupid."

"You couldn't be that, Shirley, dear."

"Thank you, captain."

They discussed family matters for a few minutes; then she said, with elaborate irrelevance:

"Well, we must hope that your appearance will cause no battles to be fought in our garden. There was enough fighting about here in old times."

"Take heart, little sister. I shall protect you. Oh, it's rather decent of Armitage to have kept away from you, Shirley, after all that fuss about the bogus baron."

"Which he wasn't!"

"Well, Sanderson says he couldn't have been, and the rogues' gallery pictures don't resemble our friend at all."

"Ugh, don't speak of it!" And Shirley shrugged her shoulders. She suffered her eyes to climb the slopes of the far hills. Then she looked steadily at her brother and laughed.

"What do you and father and Baron von Marhof want with Mr. John Armitage?" she asked.

"Guess again!" exclaimed Dick hurriedly. "Has that been the undercurrent of your conversation? As I may have said before in this connection, you disappoint me, Shirley. You seem unable to forget that fellow."

He paused, grew very serious and bent forward in his wicker chair.

"Have you seen John Armitage since I saw him?"

"Impertinent! How dare you?"

"But, Shirley, the question is fair!"

"Is it, Richard?"

"And I want you to answer me."

"That's different."

He rose and took several steps toward her. She stood against the railing, with her hands behind her back.

"Shirley, you are the finest girl in the world, but you wouldn't do this!"

"This what, Dick?"

"You know what I mean. I ask you again—have you or have you not seen Armitage since you came to the Springs?"

He spoke impatiently, his eyes upon hers. A wave of color swept her face, and then her anger passed, and she was her usual good natured self.

"Baron von Marhof is a charming old gentleman, isn't he?"

"He's a regular old brick," declared Dick solemnly.

"It's a great privilege for a young man like you to know him, Dick, and to have private talks with him and the governor about subjects of deep importance. The governor is a good deal of a man himself."

"I am proud to be his son," declared Dick, meeting Shirley's eyes unflinchingly.

Shirley was silent for a moment, while Dick whistled a few bars from the latest waltz.

"A captain—a mere captain of the line—is not often plucked out of his post when in good health and standing—after a long leave for foreign travel—and sent away to visit his parents and help entertain a distinguished ambassador."

"Thanks for the 'mere captain,' dearest. You needn't rub it in."

"I wouldn't. But you are fair game—for your sister only. And you're better known than you were before that little supper for the Spanish attache. It rather directed attention to you. Didn't it, Dick?"

(Concluded on Sixth Page.)

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