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

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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 rein under a clump of wild cherry trees at the roadside and waited. Several hundred yards away lay the Claiborne sheepfold, with a broad pasture rising 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 woodwork, 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 clambered 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. "It is my affair," blurted the big fellow. "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 below 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



"It was you that tried the knife on my body."

afforded a toilsome path for runners. Zmal already realized that he had blundered 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 woods and drifted off toward the sheepfold. Then a noble music rose from the kennels.

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

Zmal peered through 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 swerved 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.

"Stop; I want the letter!" shouted Oscar in German. The man turned slowly, astounded, 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 swerved 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 starry 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 men 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 close 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 off with the 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 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



"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.

"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.
Winkelried, 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 don't 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.

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