

THE PORT OF MISSING MEN

By MEREDITH NICHOLSON, Author of "The House of a Thousand Candles"

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The rain was soaking Armitage thoroughly, but its persistent beat covered any slight noises made by his own movements...

"The old man's death is only the first step. We require a succession of deaths."

"We require three, to be explicit, not more or less. We should be fortunate if the remaining two could be accomplished as easily as Stroebel's."

"He was a beast. He is well dead."

"That depends on the way you look at it. They seem really to be mourning the old beggar at Vienna. It is the way of a people. They like to be ruled by a savage hand. The people, as you have heard me say before, are fools."

The last speaker was a young man whom Armitage had never seen before. He was a decided blond, with close trimmed straw colored beard and slightly curling hair. Opposite him, and facing the door, sat Chauvenet.

On the table between them were decanters and liqueur glasses.

"I am going to America at once," said Chauvenet, holding his filled glass toward a brass lamp of an old type that hung from the ceiling.

"It is probably just as well," said the other. "There's work to do there."

We must not forget our more legitimate business in the midst of these pleasant side issues."

"The field is easy. After our delightful continental capitals, where, as you know, one is never quite sure of oneself, it is pleasant to breathe the democratic airs of Washington," remarked Chauvenet.

"Particularly so, my dear friend, when one is blessed with your delightful social gifts. I envy you your capacity for making others happy."

There was a keen irony in the fellow's tongue, and the edge of it evidently touched Chauvenet, who scowled and bent forward, with his fingers on the table.

"Enough of that, if you please."

"As you will, caro, but you will pardon me for offering my condolences on the regrettable departure of la belle Americaine. If you had not been so intent on matters of state you would undoubtedly have found her here. As it is, you are now obliged to see her on her native soil. A month in Washington may do much for you. She is beautiful and reasonably rich. Her brother, the tall captain, is said to be the best horseman in the American army."

"Humph! He is an ass," ejaculated Chauvenet.

A servant now appeared bearing a fresh bottle of cordial. He was distinguished by a small head upon a tall and powerful body and bore little resemblance to a house servant. While he brushed the cigar ashes from the table the men continued their talk without heeding him.

Chauvenet and his friend had spoken from the first in French, but in addressing some directions to the servant, the blond, who assumed the role of host, employed a Servian dialect.

"I think we were saying that the mortality list in certain directions will have to be stimulated a trifle before we can do our young friend Francis any good. You have business in America, caro. That paper we fished from old Stroebel strengthens our hold on Francis, but there is still that question as to Karl and Frederick Augustus. Our dear Francis is not satisfied. He wishes to be quite sure that his dear father and brother are dead. We must reassure him, dearest Jules."

"Don't be a fool, Durand. You never seem to understand that the United States of America is a trifle larger than a barnyard. And I don't believe those fellows are over there. They're probably lying in wait here somewhere ready to take advantage of any opportunity—that is, if they are alive. A man can hardly fall to be impressed with the fact that so few lives stand between him and—"

"The heights—the heights!" And the young man, whom Chauvenet called Durand, lifted his tiny glass airily.

"Yes, the heights," replied Chauvenet a little dreamily.

"But that declaration—that document! You have never honored me with a glimpse, but you have it put safely away, I dare say."

"There is no place—but one—that I dare risk. It is always within easy reach, my dear friend."

"You will do well to destroy that document. It is much better out of the way."

"Your deficiencies in the matter of wisdom are unfortunate. That paper constitutes our chief asset, my dear associate. So long as we have it we are able to keep dear Francis in order. Therefore we shall hold fast to it, remembering that we risked much in removing it from the lamented Stroebel's archives."

"Do you say 'risked much'? My valued neck, that is all!" said the other. "You and Winklerdie are without gratitude."

"You will do well," said Chauvenet, "to keep an eye open in Vienna for the unknown. If you hear murmurs in Hungary one of these fine days—Nothing has happened for some time; therefore much may happen."

He glanced at his watch.

"I have work in Paris before sailing

for New York. Shall we discuss the matter of those Peruvian claims? That is business. These other affairs are more in the nature of delightful diversions, my dear comrade."

"They drew nearer the table, and Durand produced a box of papers, over which he bent with serious attention. Armitage had heard practically all of their dialogue and, what was of equal interest, had been able to study the faces and learn the tones of voice of the two conspirators. He was cramped from his position on the narrow balcony and wet and chilled by the rain, which was now slowly abating. He had learned much that he wished to know and with an ease that astonished him, and he was well content to withdraw with gratitude for his good fortune."

His legs were numb, and he clung close to the railing of the little ladder for support as he crept toward the area. At the second story his foot slipped on the wet iron, smooth from long use, and he stumbled down several steps before he recovered himself. He listened a moment, heard nothing but the tinkle of the rain in the spout, then continued his retreat.

As he stepped out upon the brick courtyard he was seized from behind by a pair of strong arms that clasped him tight. In a moment he was thrown across the threshold of a door into an unlighted room, where his captor promptly sat upon him and proceeded to strike a light.

He began calling lustily up the narrow stairwell in Servian, changing in a moment to German. He made a ludicrous figure, as he held his revolver at arm's length, craning his neck into the passage and howling until he was red in the face. He paused to listen, then renewed his cries, while Armitage, with his back against the rack of pots, studied the room and made his plans.

"There is a thief here! I have caught a thief!" yelled the Servian, now exasperated by the silence above. Then, as he relaxed a moment and turned to make sure that his revolver still covered Armitage, there was a sudden sound of steps above, and a voice bawled angrily down the stairway: "Zmal, stop your noise and tell me what's the trouble."

It was the voice of Durand speaking in the Servian dialect, and Zmal opened his mouth to explain.

As the big fellow roared his reply Armitage snatched from the rack a heavy iron boiling pot, swung it high by the bail with both hands and let it

fly with all his might at the Servian's head, upturned in the earnestness of his bawling. On the instant the revolver roared loudly in the narrow kitchen, and Armitage seized the brass lamp and flung it from him upon the hearth, where it fell with a great clatter without exploding.

It was instantly pitch dark. The Servian had gone down like a felled ox, and Armitage, at the threshold, leaped over him into the hall past the rear stairs, down which the men were stumbling, cursing volubly as they came.

Armitage had assumed the existence of a front stairway, and now that he was launched upon an unexpected adventure he was in a humor to prolong it for a moment even at further risk. He crept along a dark passage to the front door, found and turned the key to provide himself with a ready exit, then, as he heard the men from above stumble over the prostrate Servian, he bounded up the front stairway, gained the second floor, then the third and readily found by its light the room that he had observed earlier from the outside.

Below there was smothered confusion and the crackling of matches as Durand and Chauvenet sought to grasp the unexpected situation that confronted them. The big servant, Armitage knew, would hardly be able to clear matters for them at once, and he hurriedly turned over the packets of papers that lay on the table. They were claims of one kind and another against several South and Central American republics, chiefly for naval and military supplies, and he merely noted their general character. They were, on the usual manner of business, on the back of each had been printed with a rubber stamp the words: "Vienna, Paris, Washington, Chauvenet et Durand."

Armitage snatched up the coat which Chauvenet had so carefully placed on the back of his chair, ran his hands through the pockets, found them empty, then gathered the garment tightly in his hands, augured a little to himself to feel the papers sewn into the lining loose and drew forth a fat linen envelope brilliant with three seals of red wax.

[To Be Continued.]

You're losing money every day that your tenement is vacant. Let the Democrat send a tenant 3 days for

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Armitage had resolved to play the part of an Englishman who understood no German, and he addressed the man sharply in English several times to signify that he did not understand.

The Servian half turned toward his prisoner, the revolver in his left hand, while with the fingers of his right he felt laboriously for a lamp that had been revealed by the fitful flashes of the matches. It is not an easy matter to light a lamp when you have only one hand to work with, particularly when you are obliged to keep an eye on a mysterious prisoner of whose character you are ignorant, and it was several minutes before the job was done.

"You will go to that corner," and the Servian translated for his prisoner's benefit with a gesture of the revolver.

"Anything to please you, worthy fellow," replied Armitage, and he obeyed with amiable alacrity. The man's object was to get him as far from the inner door as possible while he called help from above, which was, of course, the wise thing from his point of view, as Armitage recognized.

Armitage stood with his back against a rack of pots. The table was at his left and beyond it the door opening upon the court. A barred window was at his right. Opposite him was another door that communicated with the interior of the house and disclosed the lower steps of a rude stairway leading upward. The Servian now closed and locked the outer kitchen door with care.

Armitage had lost his hat in the area; his light walking stick lay in the middle of the floor; his innersock coat hung wet and bedraggled about him; his shirt was crumpled and soiled. But his air of good humor and his tame acceptance of capture seemed to increase the Servian's caution, and he backed away toward the inner door with his revolver still pointed at Armitage's head.

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