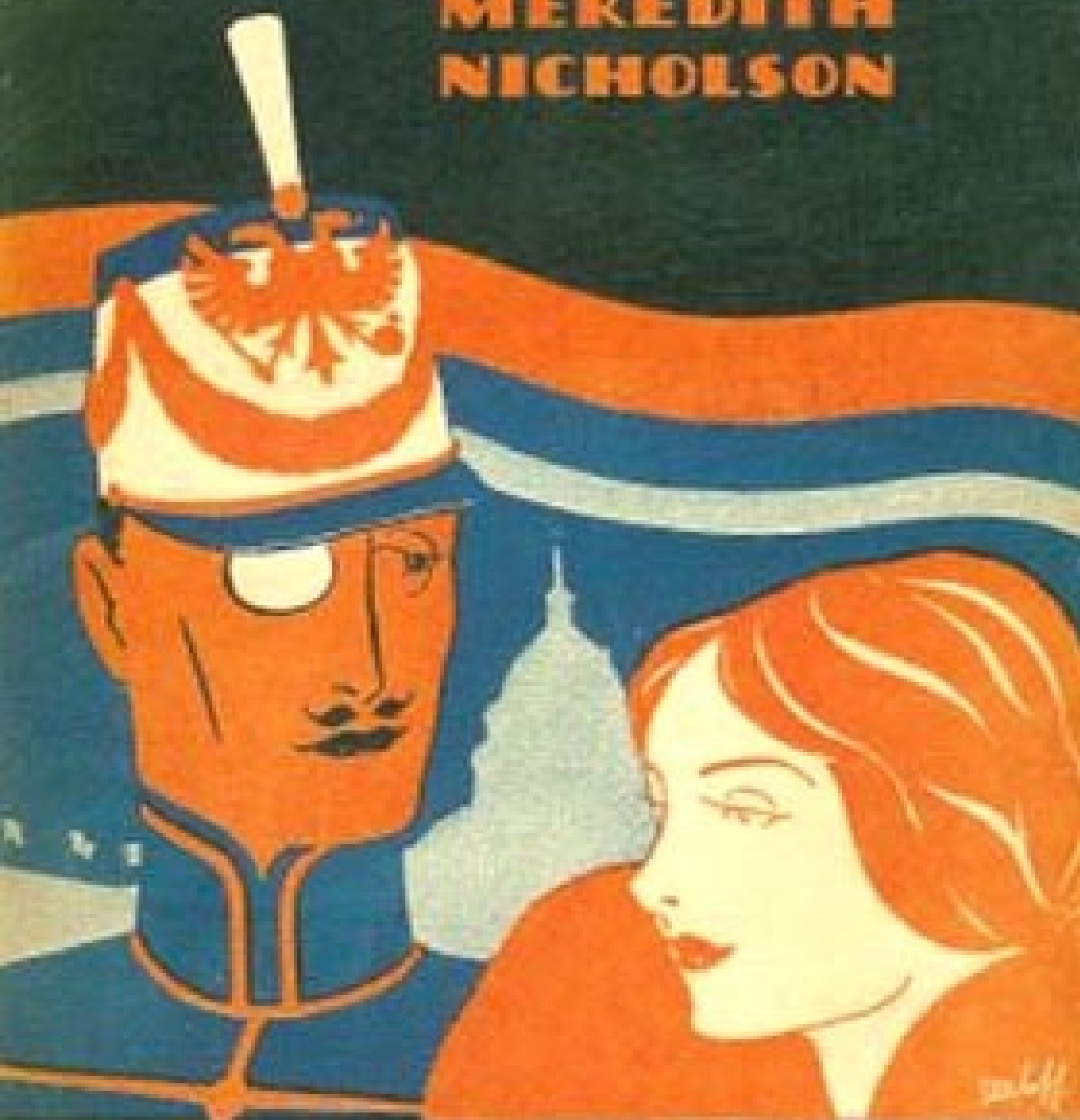


THE PORT OF MISSING MEN

MEREDITH
NICHOLSON



B O N I B O O K S



The Port of Missing Men

Meredith Nicholson

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About Nicholson:

Meredith Nicholson (December 9, 1866 – December 22, 1947) was a best-selling author from Indiana, United States, a politician, and a diplomat.

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The Shining Road

Come, sweetheart, let us ride away beyond the city's bound,
And seek what pleasant lands across the distant hills are found.
There is a golden light that shines beyond the verge of dawn,
And there are happy highways leading on and always on;
So, sweetheart, let us mount and ride, with never a backward glance,
To find the pleasant shelter of the Valley of Romance.
Before us, down the golden road, floats dust from charging steeds,
Where two adventurous companies clash loud in mighty deeds;
And from the tower that stands alert like some tall, beckoning pine,
E'en now, my heart, I see afar the lights of welcome shine!
So loose the rein and cheer the steed and let us race away
To seek the lands that lie beyond the Borders of To-day.
Draw rein and rest a moment here in this cool vale of peace;
The race half-run, the goal half-won, half won the sure release!
To right and left are flowery fields, and brooks go singing down
To mock the sober folk who still are prisoned in the town.
Now to the trail again, dear heart; my arm and blade are true,
And on some plain ere night descend I'll break a lance for you!
O sweetheart, it is good to find the pathway shining clear!
The road is broad, the hope is sure, and you are near and dear!
So loose the rein and cheer the steed and let us race away
To seek the lands that lie beyond the borders of To-day.
Oh, we shall hear at last, my heart, a cheering welcome cried
As o'er a clattering drawbridge through the Gate of Dreams we ride!

Chapter 1

"EVENTS, EVENTS"

Time hath, my lord, a wallet at his back
Wherein he puts alms for oblivion.
—*Troilus and Cressida*.

"The knowledge that you're alive gives me no pleasure," growled the grim old Austrian premier.

"Thank you!" laughed John Armitage, to whom he had spoken. "You have lost none of your old amiability; but for a renowned diplomat, you are remarkably frank. When I called on you in Paris, a year ago, I was able to render you—I believe you admitted it—a slight service."

Count Ferdinand von Stroebel bowed slightly, but did not take his eyes from the young man who sat opposite him in his rooms at the Hotel Monte Rosa in Geneva. On the table between them stood an open despatch box, and about it lay a number of packets of papers which the old gentleman, with characteristic caution, had removed to his own side of the table before admitting his caller. He was a burly old man, with massive shoulders and a great head thickly covered with iron-gray hair.

He trusted no one, and this accounted for his presence in Geneva in March, of the year 1903, whither he had gone to receive the report of the secret agents whom he had lately despatched to Paris on an errand of peculiar delicacy. The agents had failed in their mission, and Von Stroebel was not tolerant of failure. Perhaps if he had known that within a week the tapers would burn about his bier in Saint Stephen's Cathedral, at Vienna, while his life and public services would be estimated in varying degrees of admiration or execration by the newspapers of Europe, he might not have dealt so harshly with his hard-worked spies.

It was not often that the light in the old man's eyes was as gentle as now. He had sent his secret agents away and was to return to Vienna on the following day. The young man whom he now entertained in his apartments received his whole attention. He picked up the card which lay on the table and scrutinized it critically, while his eyes lighted with sudden humor.

The card was a gentleman's *carte de visite*, and bore the name John Armitage.

"I believe this is the same alias you were using when I saw you in Paris. Where did you get it?" demanded the minister.

"I rather liked the sound of it, so I had the cards made," replied the young man. "Besides, it's English, and I pass readily for an Englishman. I have quite got used to it."

"Which is not particularly creditable; but it's probably just as well so."

He drew closer to the table, and his keen old eyes snapped with the intentness of his thought. The hands he clasped on the table were those of age, and it was pathetically

evident that he folded them to hide their slight palsy.

"I hope you are quite well," said Armitage kindly.

"I am not. I am anything but well. I am an old man, and I have had no rest for twenty years."

"It is the penalty of greatness. It is Austria's good fortune that you have devoted yourself to the affairs of government. I have read—only to-day, in the *Contemporary Review*—an admirable tribute to your sagacity in handling the Servian affair. Your work was masterly. I followed it from the beginning with deepest interest."

The old gentleman bowed half-unconsciously, for his thoughts were far away, as the vague stare in his small, shrewd eyes indicated.

"But you are here for rest—one comes to Geneva at this season for nothing else."

"What brings you here?" asked the old man with sudden energy. "If the papers you gave me in Paris are forgeries and you are waiting—"

"Yes; assuming that, what should I be waiting for?"

"If you are waiting for events—for events! If you expect something to happen!"

Armitage laughed at the old gentleman's earnest manner, asked if he might smoke, and lighted a cigarette.

"Waiting doesn't suit me. I thought you understood that. I was not born for the waiting list. You see, I have strong hands—and my wits are—let us say—average!"

Von Stroebel clasped his own hands together more firmly and bent toward Armitage searchingly.

"Is it true"—he turned again and glanced about—"is it positively true that the Archduke Karl is dead?"

"Yes; quite true. There is absolutely no doubt of it," said Armitage, meeting the old man's eyes steadily.

"The report that he is still living somewhere in North America is persistent. We hear it frequently in Vienna; I have heard it since you told me that story and gave me those papers in Paris last year."

"I am aware of that," replied John Armitage; "but I told you the truth. He died in a Canadian lumber camp. We were in the north hunting—you may recall that he was fond of that sort of thing."

"Yes, I remember; there was nothing else he did so well," growled Von Stroebel.

"And the packet I gave you—"

The old man nodded.

"—that packet contained the Archduke Karl's sworn arraignment of his wife. It is of great importance, indeed, to Francis, his worthless son, or supposed son, who may present himself for coronation one of these days!"

"Not with Karl appearing in all parts of the world, never quite dead, never quite alive—and his son Frederick Augustus lurking with him in the shadows. Who knows whether they are dead?"

"I am the only person on earth in a position to make that clear," said John Armitage.

"Then you should give me the documents."

"No; I prefer to keep them. I assure you that I have sworn proof of the death of the Archduke Karl, and of his son Frederick Augustus. Those papers are in a box in the Bronx Loan and Trust Company, in New York City."

"I should have them; I *must* have them!" thundered the old man.

"In due season; but not just now. In fact, I have regretted parting with that document I gave you in Paris. It is safer in America than in Vienna. If you please, I should like to have it again, sir."

The palsy in the old man's hands had increased, and he strove to control his agitation; but fear had never been reckoned among his weaknesses, and he turned stormily upon Armitage.

"That packet is lost, I tell you!" he blurted, as though it were something that he had frequently explained before. "It was stolen from under my very nose only a month ago! That's what I'm here for—my agents are after the thief, and I came to Geneva to meet them, to find out why they have not caught him. Do you imagine that I travel for pleasure at my age, Mr. John Armitage?"

Count von Stroebel's bluster was merely a cloak to hide his confusion—a cloak, it may be said, to which he did not often resort; but in this case he watched Armitage warily. He clearly expected some outburst of indignation from the young man, and he was unfeignedly relieved when Armitage, after opening and closing his eyes quickly, reached for a fresh cigarette and lighted it with the deft ease of habit.

"The packet has been stolen," he observed calmly; "whom do you suspect of taking it?"

The old man leaned upon the table heavily.

"That amiable Francis—"

"The suggestion is not dismaying. Francis would not know an opportunity if it offered."

"But his mother—she is the devil!" blurted the old man.

"Pray drop that," said Armitage in a tone that caused the old man to look at him with a new scrutiny. "I want the paper back for the very reason that it contains that awful indictment of her. I have been uncomfortable ever since I gave it to you; and I came to ask you for it that I might keep it safe in my own hands. But the document is lost,—am I to understand that Francis has it?"

"Not yet! But Rambaud has it, and Rambaud and Francis are as thick as thieves."

"I don't know Rambaud. The name is unfamiliar."

"He has a dozen names—one for every capital. He even operates in Washington, I have heard. He's a blackmailer, who aims high—a broker in secrets, a scandal-peddler. He's a bad lot, I tell you. I've had my best men after him, and they've just been here to report another failure. If you have nothing better to do—" began the old man.

"Yes; that packet must be recovered," answered Armitage. "If your agents have failed at the job it may be worth my while to look for it."

His quiet acceptance of the situation irritated the minister.

"You entertain me, John Armitage! You speak of that packet as though it were a pound of tea. Francis and his friends, Winkelried and Rambaud, are not chasers of fireflies, I would have you know. If the Archduke and his son are dead, then a few more deaths and Francis would rule the Empire."

John Armitage and Count von Stroebel stared at each other in silence.

"Events! Events!" muttered the old man presently, and he rested one of his hands upon the despatch box, as though it were a symbol of authority and power.

"Events!" the young man murmured.

"Events!" repeated Count von Stroebel without humor. "A couple of deaths and

there you see him, on the ground and quite ready. Karl was a genius, therefore he could not be king. He threw away about five hundred years of work that had been done for him by other people—and he cajoled you into sharing his exile. You threw away your life for him! Bah! But you seem sane enough!"

The prime minister concluded with his rough burr; and Armitage laughed outright.

"Why the devil don't you go to Vienna and set yourself up like a gentleman?" demanded the premier.

"Like a gentleman?" repeated Armitage. "It is too late. I should die in Vienna in a week. Moreover, I *am* dead, and it is well, when one has attained that beatific advantage, to stay dead."

"Francis is a troublesome blackguard," declared the old man. "I wish to God *he* would form the dying habit, so that I might have a few years in peace; but he is forever turning up in some mischief. And what can you do about it? Can we kick him out of the army without a scandal? Don't you suppose he could go to Budapest tomorrow and make things interesting for us if he pleased? He's as full of treason as he can stick, I tell you."

Armitage nodded and smiled.

"I dare say," he said in English; and when the old statesman glared at him he said in German: "No doubt you are speaking the truth."

"Of course I speak the truth; but this is a matter for action, and not for discussion. That packet was stolen by intention, and not by chance, John Armitage!"

There was a slight immaterial sound in the hall, and the old prime minister slipped from German to French without changing countenance as he continued:

"We have enough troubles in Austria without encouraging treason. If Rambaud and his chief, Winkelried, could make a king of Francis, the brokerage—the commission—would be something handsome; and Winkelried and Rambaud are clever men."

"I know of Winkelried. The continental press has given much space to him of late; but Rambaud is a new name."

"He is a skilled hand. He is the most daring scoundrel in Europe."

Count von Stroebel poured a glass of brandy from a silver flask and sipped it slowly.

"I will show you the gentleman's pleasant countenance," said the minister, and he threw open a leather portfolio and drew from it a small photograph which he extended to Armitage, who glanced at it carelessly and then with sudden interest.

"Rambaud!" he exclaimed.

"That's his name in Vienna. In Paris he is something else. I will furnish you a list of his *noms de guerre*."

"Thank you. I should like all the information you care to give me; but it may amuse you to know that I have seen the gentleman before."

"That is possible," remarked the old man, who never evinced surprise in any circumstances.

"I expect to see him here within a few days."

Count von Stroebel held up his empty glass and studied it attentively, while he waited for Armitage to explain why he expected to see Rambaud in Geneva.

"He is interested in a certain young woman. She reached here yesterday; and Rambaud, alias Chauvenet, is quite likely to arrive within a day or so."

"Jules Chauvenet is the correct name. I must inform my men," said the minister.

"You wish to arrest him?"

"You ought to know me better than that, Mr. John Armitage! Of course I shall not arrest him! But I must get that packet. I can't have it peddled all over Europe, and I can't advertise my business by having him arrested here. If I could catch him once in Vienna I should know what to do with him! He and Winkelried got hold of our plans in that Bulgarian affair last year and checkmated me. He carries his wares to the best buyers—Berlin and St. Petersburg. So there's a woman, is there? I've found that there usually is!"

"There's a very charming young American girl, to be more exact."

The old man growled and eyed Armitage sharply, while Armitage studied the photograph.

"I hope you are not meditating a preposterous marriage. Go back where you belong, make a proper marriage and wait—"

"Events!" and John Armitage laughed. "I tell you, sir, that waiting is not my *forte*. That's what I like about America; they're up and at it over there; the man who waits is lost."

"They're a lot of swine!" rumbled Von Stroebel's heavy bass.

"I still owe allegiance to the Schomburg crown, so don't imagine you are hitting me. But the swine are industrious and energetic. Who knows but that John Armitage might become famous among them—in politics, in finance! But for the deplorable accident of foreign birth he might become president of the United States. As it is, there are thousands of other offices worth getting—why not?"

"I tell you not to be a fool. You are young and—fairly clever—"

Armitage laughed at the reluctance of the count's praise.

"Thank you, with all my heart!"

"Go back where you belong and you will have no regrets. Something may happen—who can tell? Events—events—if a man will watch and wait and study events—"

"Bless me! They organize clubs in every American village for the study of events," laughed Armitage; then he changed his tone. "To be sure, the Bourbons have studied events these many years—a pretty spectacle, too."

"Carrion! Carrion!" almost screamed the old man, half-rising in his seat. "Don't mention those scavengers to me! Bah! The very thought of them makes me sick. But"—he gulped down more of the brandy—"where and how do you live?"

"Where? I own a cattle ranch in Montana and since the Archduke's death I have lived there. He carried about fifty thousand pounds to America with him. He took care that I should get what was left when he died—and, I am almost afraid to tell you that I have actually augmented my inheritance! Just before I left I bought a place in Virginia to be near Washington when I got tired of the ranch."

"Washington!" snorted the count. "In due course it will be the storm center of the world."

"You read the wrong American newspapers," laughed Armitage.

They were silent for a moment, in which each was busy with his own thoughts; then the count remarked, in as amiable a tone as he ever used:

"Your French is first rate. Do you speak English as well?"

"As readily as German, I think. You may recall that I had an English tutor, and

maybe I did not tell you in that interview at Paris that I had spent a year at Harvard University."

"What the devil did you do that for?" growled Von Stroebel.

"From curiosity, or ambition, as you like. I was in Cambridge at the law school for a year before the Archduke died. That was three years ago. I am twenty-eight, as you may remember. I am detaining you; I have no wish to rake over the past; but I am sorry—I am very sorry we can't meet on some common ground."

"I ask you to abandon this democratic nonsense and come back and make a man of yourself. You might go far—very far; but this democracy has hold of you like a disease."

"What you ask is impossible. It is just as impossible now as it was when we discussed it in Paris last year. To sit down in Vienna and learn how to keep that leaning tower of an Empire from tumbling down like a stack of bricks—it does not appeal to me. You have spent a laborious life in defending a silly medieval tradition of government. You are using all the apparatus of the modern world to perpetuate an ideal that is as old and dead as the Rameses dynasty. Every time you use the telegraph to send orders in an emperor's name you commit an anachronism."

The count frowned and growled.

"Don't talk to me like that. It is not amusing."

"No; it is not funny. To see men like you fetching and carrying for dull kings, who would drop through the gallows or go to planting turnips without your brains—it does not appeal to my sense of humor or to my imagination."

"You put it coarsely," remarked the old man grimly. "I shall perhaps have a statue when I am gone."

"Quite likely; and mobs will rendezvous in its shadow to march upon the royal palaces. If I were coming back to Europe I should go in for something more interesting than furnishing brains for sickly kings."

"I dare say! Very likely you would persuade them to proclaim democracy and brotherhood everywhere."

"On the other hand, I should become king myself."

"Don't be a fool, Mr. John Armitage. Much as you have grieved me, I should hate to see you in a madhouse."

"My faculties, poor as they are, were never clearer. I repeat that if I were going to furnish the brains for an empire I should ride in the state carriage myself, and not be merely the driver on the box, who keeps the middle of the road and looks out for sharp corners. Here is a plan ready to my hand. Let me find that lost document, appear in Vienna and announce myself Frederick Augustus, the son of the Archduke Karl! I knew both men intimately. You may remember that Frederick and I were born in the same month. I, too, am Frederick Augustus! We passed commonly in America as brothers. Many of the personal effects of Karl and Augustus are in my keeping—by the Archduke's own wish. You have spent your life studying human nature, and you know as well as I do that half the world would believe my story if I said I was the Emperor's nephew. In the uneasy and unstable condition of your absurd empire I should be hailed as a diversion, and then—events, events!"

Count von Stroebel listened with narrowing eyes, and his lips moved in an effort to find words with which to break in upon this impious declaration. When Armitage