THE PRINCESS VIRGINIA

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BY

C. N. & A. M. WILLIAMSON

Illustrations by Leon Guipon

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By the same Authors

My Friend the Chauffeur
Lady Betty Across the Water
Rosemary in Search of a Father

"Who is that girl?" asked Count von Breitstein
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THE PRINCESS VIRGINIA

CHAPTER I

WHEN THE NEWS CAME

“

No,” said the Princess. “No. I’m—*dashed* if I do.”

“My darling child!” exclaimed the Grand Duchess. “You’re impossible. If any one should hear you!”

“It’s he who’s impossible,” the Princess amended. “I’m just trying to show you —”

“Or to shock me. You are *so* like your grandmother.”

“That’s the best compliment any one can give me, which is lucky, as it’s given so often,” laughed the Princess. “Dear, adorable Virginia!” She cuddled into the pink hollow of her hand the pearl-framed ivory miniature of a beautiful, smiling girl, which always hung from a thin gold chain around her neck. “They shouldn’t have named me after you, should they, if they hadn’t wanted me to be like you?”

“It was partly a question of money, dear,” sighed the Grand Duchess. “If my mother hadn’t left a legacy to my first daughter only on consideration that her own extremely American name of Virginia should be perpetuated—”

“It was a delicious way of being patriotic. I’m glad she did it. I love being the only Royal Princess with American blood in my veins and an American name on my handkerchiefs. Do you believe for an instant that if Grandmother Virginia were alive, she would let Granddaughter Virginia marry Prince Henri de Touraine?”

“I don’t see why not,” said the Grand Duchess. “She wasn’t too patriotic to marry an English Duke, and startle London as the first American Duchess. Heavens, the things she used to do, if one could believe half the wild stories my father’s sister told me in warning! And as for my father, though a *most* charming man, of course, he could not—er—have been called precisely *estimable*, while Prince Henri certainly is, and an exceedingly good match even for you—in present circumstances.”

“Call him a match, if you like, Mother. He’s undoubtedly a stick. But no, he’s

not a match for me. There's only one on earth." And Virginia's eyes were lifted to the sky as if, instead of existing on earth, the person in her thoughts were placed as high as the sun that shone above her.

"I should have preferred an Englishman—for you," said the Grand Duchess, "if only there were one of suitable rank, free to—"

"I'm not thinking of an Englishman," murmured her daughter.

"If only you *would* think of poor Henri!"

"Never of him. You know I said I would be d—"

"Don't repeat it! Oh, when you look at me in that way, how like you are to your grandmother's portrait at home—the one in white, painted just before her marriage. One might have known you would be extraordinary. That sort of thing invariably skips over a generation."

The Grand Duchess laid down the theory as a law; and whether or no she were right, it was at least sure that she had inherited nothing of the first Virginia's daring originality. Some of her radiant mother's beauty, perhaps, watered down to gentle prettiness, for the Hereditary Grand Duchess of Baumenburg-Drippe at fifty-one was still a daintily-attractive woman, a middle-aged Dresden china lady, with a perfect complexion, preserved by an almost perfect temper; surprised eyebrows, kindly dimples, and a conventional upper lip.

She was not by birth "Hereditary." Her lord and (very much) her master had been that, and had selected her to help him reign over the Hereditary Grand Duchy of Baumenburg-Drippe, not only because her father was an English Duke with Royal Stuart blood in his veins, but because her Virginian mother had brought much gold to the Northmoreland exchequer. Afterwards, he had freely spent such portion of that gold as had come to his coffers, in trying to keep his little estates intact; but now it was all gone, and long ago he had died of grief and bitter disappointment; the Hereditary Grand Duchy of Baumenburg-Drippe was ruled by a cousinly understudy of the German Emperor William the Second; the one son of the marriage had been adopted, as heir to his crown, by the childless King of Hungaria; the handsome and lamentably extravagant old Duke of Northmoreland was dead; his title and vast estates had passed to a distant and disagreeable relative; and the widowed Grand Duchess, with her one fair daughter, had lived for years in a pretty old house with a high-walled garden, at Hampton Court, lent by the generosity of the King and Queen of England.

For a long moment the Dresden china lady thought in silence and something of sadness. Then she roused herself again and asked the one and only Royal Princess with an American name what, in the way of a match, she really expected.

“What do I expect?” echoed Virginia. “Why, I *wish* for the Moon—no, I mean the Sun. But I don’t expect to get it.”

“Is that a way of saying you never intend to marry?”

“I’m afraid it amounts to that,” admitted Virginia, “since there is only one man in the world I would have for my husband.”

“My dearest! A man you have let yourself learn to care for? A man beneath you? How terrible! But you see no one. I—”

“I’ve never seen this man. And—I’m not ‘in love’ with him; that would be too foolish. Because, instead of being beneath, he’s far, far above me.”

“Virginia! Of whom can you be talking? Or is this another joke?”

Virginia blushed a little, and instead of answering her mother’s look of helpless appeal, stared at the row of tall hollyhocks that blazed along the ivy-hidden garden wall. She did not speak for an instant, and then she said with the dainty shyness of a child pinned to a statement by uncomprehending elders, “It isn’t a joke. Nonsense, maybe—yet not a joke. I’ve always thought of him—for so many years I’ve forgotten when it first began. He’s so great, so—everything that appeals to me; how could I help thinking about him, and putting him on a pedestal? I—there’s no idea of marriage in my mind, of course. Only—there’s no other man possible, after all the thoughts I’ve given him. No other man in the world.”

“My dear, you *must* tell me his name.”

“What, when I’ve described him—almost—do you still need to hear his name? Well then, I—I’m not ashamed to tell. It’s ‘Leopold.’”

“Leopold! You’re talking of the Emperor of Rhaetia.”

“As if it could have been any one else.”

“And you have thought of him—you’ve cherished him—for years—as an ideal! Why, you never spoke of him particularly before.”

“That’s because you never seriously wanted me to take a husband until this prim, dull French Henri proposed himself. My thoughts were my own. I wouldn’t have told, only—you see why.”

“Of course. My precious child, how extremely interesting, and—and romantic.” Again the Grand Duchess lapsed into silence. Yet her expression did not suggest a stricken mind. She merely appeared astonished, with an astonishment that might turn into an emotion more agreeable.

Meanwhile it was left for Virginia to look vexed, vexed with herself. She wished that she had not betrayed her poor little foolish secret—so shadowy a secret that it was hardly worthy of the name. Yet it had been precious—precious since childhood, precious as the immediate jewel of her soul, because it had been the jewel of her soul, and no one else had dreamed of its existence. Now she had shown it to other eyes—almost flaunted it. Never again could it be a joy to her.

In the little room, half study, half boudoir, which was her own, there was a desk, locked in her absence, where souvenirs of the young Emperor of Rhaetia had been accumulating for years. There were photographs which Virginia had contrived to buy secretly; portraits of Leopold from an early age, up to the present, when he was shown as a tall, dark, cold-eyed, warm-lipped, firm-chinned young man of thirty. There were paragraphs cut from newspapers, telling of his genius as a soldier, his prowess as a mountaineer and hunter of big game, with dramatic anecdotes of his haughty courage in time of danger, his impulsive charities, his well thought out schemes for the welfare of his subjects in every walk of life.

There were black and white copies of bold, clever pictures he had painted; there was martial music composed by him, and plaintive folk-songs adapted by him, which Virginia had tried softly to herself on her little piano, when nobody was near. There were reports of speeches made by him since his accession to the Throne; accounts of improvements in guns, and an invention of a new explosive; there was a somewhat crude, yet witty play which he had written; and numerous other records of the accomplishments and achievements, and even eccentricities which had built up the Princess Virginia’s ideal of this celebrated young man, proclaimed Emperor after the great revolution eight years ago.

“You are worthy to be an Empress.”

Her mother’s voice broke into Virginia’s thoughts. She started, and found herself under inspection by the Grand Duchess. At first she frowned, then she laughed,

springing up on a quick impulse to turn earnest into jest, and so perhaps escape further catechising.

“Yes, would I not make an Empress?” she echoed, stepping out from the shadow of her favorite elm, into the noontide radiance of summer.

The sun poured over her hair, as she stood with uplifted head, and threaded it with a network of living gold, gleaming into the dark gray eyes rimmed with black lashes and turning them to jewels. Her fair skin was as flawless in the unsparing light as the petals of lilies, and her features, though a repetition of those which had made a Virginia girl famous long ago, were carved with Royal perfection.

“There is no real reason why you should not make an Empress, dearest,” said her mother, in pride of the girl’s beauty, and desiring, womanlike, to promote her child’s happiness. “Stranger things have happened. Only last week, at Windsor, the dear Queen was saying what a pity poor Henri was not more—but no matter, he is well enough. However, if—And when one comes to think of it, it’s perhaps not unnatural that Leopold of Rhaetia has never been mentioned for you, although there could be nothing against the marriage. What a match for any woman! A supreme one. Not a Royal girl but would go on her knees to him, if —”

“I wouldn’t,” said Virginia. “I might worship him, yet he should go on his knees to *me*.”

“I doubt if those proud knees of his will ever bend in homage to man or woman,” replied the Grand Duchess. “But that’s a mere fantasy. I’m serious now, darling, and I very much wish you would be.”

“Please, I’d rather not,” smiled Virginia, uneasily. “Let us not talk of the Emperor any more—and never again after this, Mother. You know now. That’s all that’s necessary, and—”

“But it’s not all that’s necessary. You have put the idea into my head, and it’s not an unpleasing idea. Besides, it has evidently been in *your* head for a long time—and—I should like to see you happy—see you in a position such as you’re entitled to grace. You are a very beautiful girl (there’s no disguising that from you, as you know you are the image of your grandmother, who was a celebrated beauty) and the best blood in Europe runs in your veins. You are royal, and yet—and yet our circumstances are such that—in fact, for the present, we’re

somewhat handicapped."

"We're beggars," said Virginia, laughing; but it was not a happy laugh.

"Cophetua married the beggar maid," the Grand Duchess reminded her, with elaborate playfulness. "And, you know, all sorts of things have happened in history—much stranger than any one would dare put in fiction, if writing of Royalties. My dear husband was second cousin once removed to the German Emperor, though he was treated—but we mustn't speak of that. The subject always upsets me. What I was leading up to, is this; though there may be other girls who, from a worldly point of view, are more desirable; still, you're *strictly* within the pale from which Leopold is entitled to choose his wife, and if—"

"Dear little Mother, there's no such 'if.' And as for me, *I* wasn't thinking of a 'worldly point of view.' The Emperor of Rhaetia barely knows that I exist. And even if by some miracle he should suddenly discover that little Princess Virginia Mary Victoria Alexandra Hildegarde of Baumenburg-Drippe was the one suitable wife for him on earth, I wouldn't have him want me because I was 'suitable,' but—because I was irresistible. I'd want his love—all his love—or I would say 'no, you must look somewhere else for your Empress.'"

"But that's nonsense, darling. Royal people seldom or never have the chance to fall in love," said the Grand Duchess.

"I'm tired of being Royal," snapped the Princess. "Being Royal does nothing but spoil all one's fun, and oblige one to do stupid, boring things, which one hates."

"Nevertheless, noblesse *does* oblige," went on the Dresden china prophetess of conventionality. "When alliances are arranged for women of our position, we must content ourselves with the hope that love may come after marriage. Or if not, we must go on doing our duty in that state of life to which Heaven has graciously called us."

"Bother duty!" broke out Virginia. "Thank goodness, in these days not all the king's horses and all the king's men can make even a Princess marry against her will. I *hate* that everlasting cant about 'duty in marriage.' When people love each other, they're kind and good, and sweet and true, because it's a joy, not because it's a duty. And that's the only sort of loyalty worth having between men and women, according to me. I wouldn't accept anything else from a man; and I should despise him if he were less—or more—exacting."

“Virginia, the way you express yourself is almost improper. I’m thankful that no one hears you except myself,” said the Grand Duchess. But at this moment, when clash of tongues and opinions seemed imminent, there occurred a happy diversion in the arrival of letters.

Virginia, who was a neglectful correspondent, had nothing; but two or three important looking envelopes claimed attention from the Grand Duchess, and as soon as the ladies were once more alone together in the sweet-scented garden, she broke the crown-stamped seal of her son Adalbert, now by adoption Crown Prince of Hungaria.

“Open the others for me, dear,” she demanded, excitedly, “while I see what Dal has to say.” And Virginia leisurely obeyed, wondering whether Dal’s news would by-and-by be passed on to her. It was always an event when a long letter came from him; and the Grand Duchess invariably laughed and exclaimed, and sometimes blushed as she read; but when she blushed, the letter was not given to the Crown Prince’s sister.

There was a note to-day from an old friend of her mother’s of whom Virginia was fond, and she had just begun to be interested in the third paragraph, all about an adorable Dandy Dinmont puppy, when an odd, half-stifled ejaculation from the Grand Duchess made the girl lift her eyes.

“Has Dal been having something beyond the common in the way of adventures?” she inquired dryly.

Her mother did not answer; but she had grown pink and then pale.

Virginia began to be uneasy. “What is the matter? Is anything wrong?” she asked.

“No—nothing in the least wrong. Far from it, indeed. But—oh, my child!”

“Mother dear, what is it?”

“Something so extraordinary—so wonderful—I mean, as a coincidence—that I can hardly speak. I suppose I can’t be dreaming? You are really talking to me in the garden, aren’t you?”

“I am, and I wish you were telling me the mystery. Do, dear. You look awake, only rather odd.”

“It would be strange if I didn’t look odd. Dal says—Dal says—”

“What has he been doing? Getting engaged?”

“No. It is—your Emperor, not Dal, who talks of being engaged.”

“Oh,” said Virginia, trying not to speak blankly, trying not to flush, trying not to show in any way the sudden sick pain in her heart.

Of course she was not in love with him. Of course, though she had been childish enough long ago to make him her ideal, and foolishly faithful enough to keep him so, she had always known that he would never be more to her than a Shadow Emperor. Some day he would marry one of those other Royal girls who were so much more suitable than she; that would be natural and right, as she had more than once told herself with no conscious pang. But now that the news had come—now that the Royal girl was actually chosen, and she must hear the letter and read about the happy event in the newspapers, it was different. She felt suddenly cold and sick under the blow; hurt and defrauded, and even jealous. She knew that she would hate the girl—some wretched, commonplace girl, with stick-out teeth, perhaps, or no figure, and no idea of the way to wear her clothes or do her hair.

But she swallowed hard, and clenched her fingers under the voluminous letter about Dandy Dinmont. “Oh, so our friend is going to be married?” she remarked lightly.

“That depends,” replied the Grand Duchess, laughing mysteriously, with a catch in her voice, as if she had been a nervous girl. “That depends. You must guess—but no, I won’t tease you. My dear, my dear, after Dal’s letter, coming as it has in the midst of such a conversation, I shall be a firm believer in telepathy. This letter, on its way to us, must have put the thoughts into our minds, and the words on our tongues. It may be that the Emperor of Rhaetia will marry; it may not. For, my sweet, beautiful girl, it depends upon—you.”

“Me?” The voice did not sound to Virginia like her own. Was she too, dreaming? Were they both in a dream?

“He wishes to marry you.”

All the letters dropped from Virginia’s lap, dropped, and fluttered to the grass slowly, like falling rose leaves. Scarcely knowing what she did, she clasped her hands over the young bosom shaken with the sudden throbbing of her heart.

Perhaps such a betrayal of feeling by a Royal maiden decorously sued (by proxy) for her hand, was scarcely correct; but Virginia had no thought for rules of conduct, as laid down for her too often by her mother.

“He wishes to marry—me?” she echoed, dazedly. “Why?”

“Providence must have drawn your inclination toward him, dearest. It is indeed a romance. Some day, no doubt, it will be told to the world in history.”

“But how did he—” Virginia broke off, and began again: “Did he tell this to Dal, and ask him to write you?”

“Not—not precisely that,” admitted the Grand Duchess, her face changing from satisfaction to uneasiness. For Virginia was difficult in some ways, though adorable in others, and held such peculiar ideas about life—inherited from her American grandmother—that it was impossible to be sure how she would receive the most ordinary announcements.

The Princess’s rapt expression faded, like the passing of dawn.

“Not precisely that?” she repeated. “Then what—how—”

“Well, perhaps—though it’s not strictly the correct thing—you had better read your brother’s letter for yourself.”

Virginia put her hands behind her back with a childish gesture, and a frightened look came into the eyes which at most times gazed bravely upon the world. “I—somehow I can’t,” she said. “Please tell me.”

“To begin with, then, you know what an admiration Dal has felt for Count von Breitstein, ever since that diplomatic visit the Rhaetian Chancellor paid to Hungaria. The fancy seemed to be mutual; but then, who could ever resist Dal, if he wanted to be liked? The Chancellor has written to him from time to time, and Dal has quite enjoyed the correspondence; the old man can be witty as well as cynical if he chooses, and Dal says he tells good stories. Now it seems (in the informal way in which such affairs are usually put forward) that Count von Breitstein has written confidentially to Dal, as our only near male relative, asking how your family would regard an alliance between Leopold and you, or if we have already disposed of your hand. At last the Emperor is inclined to listen to his Chancellor’s advice and marry, and you, as a Protestant Princess—”

“A Protestant Princess, indeed!” cried Virginia. “I protest against being

approached by him on such terms."

The face of the Grand Duchess was darkened by the gloom of her thoughts. "My daughter," she exclaimed mildly, yet despairingly, "it's not possible that when this wonderful chance—this unheard of chance—this chance that you were praying for—actually falls into your hands, you will throw it away for—for a sentimental, school-girl scruple?"

"I was not praying for it," said Virginia. "I'm sure, Mother, *you* would have considered it most bold in me to pray for it. And I didn't. I was only refusing other chances."

"Well, at all events, you have this one now. It is yours."

"Not in the one way I should have loved to see it come. Oh, Mother, why does the Emperor want to marry me? Isn't there some other reason than just because I'm a proper, Protestant Princess?"

"Of course," insisted the Grand Duchess, faintly encouraged. "Dal mentions several most excellent reasons in his letter—if you would only take them sensibly."

"I should like to hear them, at all events," answered Virginia.

"Well, you see the Empress of Rhaetia must be a Protestant, and there aren't many eligible Protestant girls who would be acceptable to the Rhaetians—girls who would be popular with the people. Oh, I have finished about that! You need not look so desperate. Besides, Dal explains that Leopold is a young man who dominates all around him. He wishes to take for his bride a girl who could not by any possibility herself be heiress to a throne. Dal fancies that his desire is to mold his wife, and therefore to take a girl without too many important and importunate relatives; for he is not one who would dream of adding to his greatness by using the wealth or position of a woman. He has all he needs, or wants, of that sort. And then, Dal reminds me, Leopold is very partial to England, who helped Rhaetia passively, in the time of her trouble eight years ago. The fact that you have lived in England and had an English education, would be favorably regarded both by Leopold and his Chancellor. And though I've never allowed you to have a photograph taken, since you were a child (I hate seeing young girls' faces in the newspapers and magazines; even though they are Royal, their features need not be public property!) and you have lived here in such seclusion that you've been little seen, still, the rumor has reached

Rhaetia that you are—good to look at. Leopold has been heard to say that, whatever else the future Empress of Rhaetia may be, he won't give his people an ugly woman to reign over them. And so, altogether—"

"And so, altogether, my references being satisfactory, at a pinch I might do for the place," cut in Virginia, with the hot, impatient rebellion of her youth. "Oh, Mother, you think me mad or a fool, I know; and perhaps I am mad; yet not mad enough not to see that it would be a great thing, a wonderful thing to be asked in marriage by the One Man in my world, if—ah, that great 'if'—he had only seen and fallen in love with me. It might have happened, you know. As you say, I'm not ugly. And I can be rather pleasant if I choose—so I believe. If he had only come to this land, to see what I was like, as Royal men did in the dear old fairy stories, and then had asked me to be his wife, why, I should have been conceited enough to think it was because he loved me, even more than because of other things. Then I should have been happy—yes, dear, I'll confess it to you now—almost happy enough to die of the great joy and triumph of it. But now I'm not happy. I will marry Leopold, or I'll marry no man. But I swear to you, I won't be married to Leopold in Count von Breitstein's hateful old, cold, cut-and-dried way."

"It's the Emperor's way as well as von Breitstein's."

"Then for once in his big, grand, obstinate life he'll have to learn that there's one insignificant girl who won't play Griselda, even for the sake of being his Empress."

The girl proclaimed this resolve, rising to her feet, with her head high, and a look in her gray eyes which told the Grand Duchess that it would be hopeless for her to argue down the resolution. At first it was a proud look, and a sad look; but suddenly a beam of light flashed into it, and began to sparkle and twinkle. Virginia smiled, and showed her dimples. Her color came and went. In a moment she was a different girl, and her mother, bewildered, fearful still, dared to hope something from the change.

"How odd you look!" she exclaimed. "You've thought of something. You are happy. You have the air of—of having found some plan."

"It found me, I think," the girl answered, laughing. "All suddenly—just in a flash. That's the way it must be with inspirations. This is one—I know it. It's all in the air—floating round me. But I shall grasp it soon."

She came close to her mother, still smiling, and knelt down in the grass at her feet, looking up with radiance in her eyes.

Luckily there was no one save the Dresden china lady and the birds and flowers to see how a young Princess threw her mantle of dignity away; for the two did not keep Royal state and a Royal retinue in the quaint old house at Hampton Court; and the big elm which Virginia loved, kindly hid the mother and daughter from intrusive eyes.

“You do love me, don’t you, dearest?” cooed the Princess, softly as a dove.

“You know I do, my child, though I don’t pretend to understand you,” sighed the Grand Duchess, well aware that she was about to be coaxed into some scheme, feeling that she would yield, and praying Providence that the yielding might not lead her into tribulation.

“People grow dull if we understand them too well,” said Virginia. “It’s like solving a puzzle. There’s no more fun in it, when it’s finished. But you wish me to be happy, darling?”

“More than I wish for anything else, excepting of course dear Dal’s—”

“Dal is a man and can take care of himself. *I* must do the best I can—poor me! And there’s something I want so much, so much, it would be heaven on earth, all my own, if I could win it. Leopold’s love, quite for myself, as a girl, not as a ‘suitable Protestant Princess.’ For a few horrid minutes, I thought it was too late to hope for that, and I must give him up, because I never could be sure if I accepted him without his love, and he *said* it had come afterwards, that it was really, really true. Anyway, it could never be the same; and I was miserable over what might have been. Then, suddenly, I saw how it still might be. I almost think I may be able to win his love, if you’ll promise to help me, dear.”

“Of course I will,” said the Grand Duchess, carried out of her pretty little, conventional self into unwonted impulsiveness, by the warmth of kisses soft and sweet as the roses on Virginia’s bosom.

“That is, I will if I can. But I don’t at all see what I can do.”

“I see. And what I want you to do, is to please, *please* see with my eyes.”

“They’re very bright ones,” smiled her mother.

Princess Virginia clasped the Grand Duchess round the waist so tightly that it hurt. Then she laughed, an odd, half-frightened, excited laugh. “Dearest, something perfectly wonderful is going to happen to you and me,” she said. “The most wonderful thing that ever has happened. We are going to have a—great—adventure. And what the end of it will be—I don’t know.”

CHAPTER II

FOUR GENTLEMEN OF IMPORTANCE

Twilight fell late in the tiny Rhaetian village of Alleheiligen. So high on the mountain side were perched the simple inn and the group of brown chalets clustering round the big church with its bulbous, Oriental spire, that they caught the last red rays of sunset and held them flashing on burnished copper roof plates, and jeweling small, bright window-panes long after the green valley below was curtained with shadow.

One September evening, two dusty traveling carriages toiled up the steep, winding road that led to the highest hamlet of the Rhaetian Alps, and a girl walking beside the foremost driver (minded, as he was, to save the jaded horses) looked up to see Alleheiligen glittering like a necklet of gems on the brown throat of the mountain. Each window was a great, separate ruby set in gold; the copper bulb that crowned the church steeple was a burning carbuncle; while above the flashing band of gorgeous color, the mountain reared its head, facing westward, its steadfast features carved in stone, the brow snow-capped and rosy where the sun touched it, blue where the shadows lay.

The driver assured the young English lady, whom he much admired for her pluck as well as beauty, that she had far better return to the carriage; that indeed, she need not have left it. Her extra weight would be but as that of a feather to the horses, which were used to carrying far heavier loads than that of to-day, up the steep mountain road to Alleheiligen in the “high” season of July and August, when many tourists from all countries came to rest for a night and see the wonderful view. He even grew voluble in his persuasions, but the girl still smilingly insisted that she liked walking, and the brown-faced fellow with the soft green hat and curly cock feather admired her the more for her firmness and endurance.

She was plainly dressed in gray, which did not show the dust, and though her skirt and short jacket were well made, and her neat little hat jaunty and becoming—almost dangerously becoming—she was not half as grand in appearance as some of the ladies who drove up with him in July and August. Still, the man said to himself, there was an air about her—no, he could not describe it even to himself—but it meant distinction. And then, as she was English, it was as pleasing as it was remarkable that she could speak Rhaetian so

prettily. She had learned it, she said when he respectfully ventured a question, because, since she was a child, she had taken an interest in Rhaetian history and literature. And this seemed strange to him, that so dainty a lady should have learned such a language for pleasure, because the people of most countries found it excessively difficult—as difficult as Hungarian and just enough like German to make it even more difficult, perhaps. But this English girl said she had picked it up easily; and the young man's heart warmed to her when she praised Rhaetian music and Rhaetian poetry.

This was the last touch; this won him wholly; and without stopping further to analyze or account for his admiration, the driver of the first carriage found himself bestowing confidences upon his gracious companion as they slowly tramped up the winding road, the reins looped over his arm.

He told her of his life; how he had not always lived down there in the valley and driven tourists for a living. Before he fell in love and married a valley girl, and had a young family to rear, his house had been aloft, in Alleheiligen. He was born on the mountain side; his mother still lived in the village. It was she who kept the inn. Ach, but a good woman, and a cook to the king's taste—or rather, the Emperor's taste—if it was her own son who said it.

He was glad that the English ladies would be stopping with her for a few days at this season. She would make them comfortable, more comfortable than would be possible at a crowded time, and then, besides, after the season was over, and the strangers had been frightened away by the first flurry of snow, the poor mother grew lonely and tired of idleness. Oh yes, she stayed the winter through. It was home to her. There were not many neighbors, then, it was true, yet she would not be happy to go away. Mountain folk never really learned to love the valleys.

What, the ladies had not written to the inn in advance? Ah, well, that would not matter at this season. There would be rooms, and to spare; the ladies could take their choice; and the mother would have a pleasant surprise. Glad he was that he chanced to be the one to bring it.

Those who knew Frau Yorvan, know that her larder was never empty of good things, and that her linen was aired and scented with the dried lavender blossoms gathered down below. Indeed, she had need to be ever in readiness for distinguished guests, because sometimes—but the eloquent tongue of Alois Yorvan was suddenly silent, like the clapper of a church bell which the ringers have ceased to pull, and his sunburnt face grew sheepish.

“Because sometimes?” echoed the girl, in her pretty Rhaetian. “What happens sometimes, that your mother must ever be expecting?”

“Oh,” the man stammered a little foolishly, “I was but going to say that she has sometimes to entertain people of the high nobility, of different nations. Alleheiligen, though small, is rather celebrated, you know.”

“Has your Emperor been here?” asked the young lady.

“It may be,” answered Alois, jauntily. “It may be. Our Emperor has been to most places.”

His companion smiled and put no more questions.

Slowly they climbed on; the two carriages, containing the English girl’s mother, a middle-aged companion, a French maid, and a reasonable supply of luggage, toiling up behind, the harness jingling with a faint sound as of fairy bells.

Then at last they came to the inn, a quaint house, half of stone, half of rich brown shingles; a huge picture, crowded with saints of special importance to Alleheiligen, painted in once crude, now faded colors, on a swinging sign. A characteristic, yodeling cry from Alois, sent forth before the highest turn of the road was reached, brought an apple-cheeked and white-capped old woman to the door; then it was the youngest of the travelers who asked, with a pleasant greeting in Rhaetian, for the best suite of rooms which Frau Yorvan could give.

But to the girl’s astonishment the landlady showed none of the delight her son had predicted. Surprised she certainly was, even startled, and certainly embarrassed. For an instant she seemed to hesitate before replying, then her emotion was partly explained by her words. Unfortunately her best rooms were engaged; four of the bedrooms with the choicest view, and the one private sitting-room the inn possessed. But if the ladies would put up with the second best, she would gladly accommodate them. Was it but for the night? Oh, for several days! (Again the apple face looked dubious.) Well, if the ladies would graciously enter, and choose from what she had to offer, she would be honored.

They did enter and presently wrote their names as Lady Mowbray, Miss Mowbray, Miss Manchester, and maid. An hour later when the new-comers, mother, daughter and *dame de compagnie*, sat down to a hot supper in a bed-chamber hastily but skilfully transformed into a private dining-room, the youngest of the three remarked to Frau Yorvan upon the peaceful stillness of her

house.

“One would think there wasn’t a soul about the place except ourselves,” said she, “yet you’ve told us you have other guests.”

“The gentlemen who are stopping here are away all day long in the mountains,” explained Frau Yorvan. “It is now the time for chamois hunting and it is for that, and also the climbing of a strange group of rocks called the Bunch of Needles, only to be done by great experts, that they come to me.”

“They are out late this evening. Aren’t you beginning to be a little anxious about them, if they go to such dangerous places?”

“Oh, to-night, gracious Fräulein, they will not return at all,” said the landlady, warming impulsively to the subject. “They often stop at a kind of hut they have near the top of the mountain, to begin some climb they may wish to undertake very early. They are much closer to it there, you see, and it saves their wasting several hours on the way. They are constantly in the habit of stopping at the hut, in fine weather; but they are very considerate; they always let me know their plans beforehand.”

“If they’re away so much, I think it a little selfish in them to keep your one private sitting-room, when you might need it for others,” remarked the girl.

“Oh, but gracious Fräulein, you must not say that!” cried the old woman, looking as much shocked as if her young guest had broken one of the commandments.

The girl laughed. “Why not?” she inquired. “Are the gentlemen of such importance that they mustn’t be criticized by strangers?”

Frau Yorvan was embarrassed. “They are excellent patrons of mine, gracious Fräulein, that is all I meant,” said she. “I cannot bear that unjust things should be thought of such—good gentlemen.”

“I was only joking,” the girl reassured her. “We are perfectly satisfied with this room, which you have made most comfortable. All I care for is that the famous walks in the neighborhood shall not be private. I may, at least, walk as much as I like and even climb a little, I and my friend, Miss Manchester, who is a daring mountaineer,” (with this she threw a glance at the middle-aged lady in black, who visibly started and grew wild-eyed in response) “for I suppose that your guests have not engaged the whole Schneehorn for their own.”

The landlady's hospitable smile returned. "No, gracious Fräulein. You are free to wander as you will, but do not, I beg you, go too far, or attempt any climbs of real difficulty, for they are not to be done without guides; and take care you do not stray into wild places where, by making some movement or sound before you were seen by the hunters, you might be mistaken for a chamois."

"Even our prowess is hardly likely to lead us into such peril as that," laughed the girl, who seemed much more friendly and inclined toward conversation than the two elders of the party. "But please wake us early to-morrow morning. My friend Miss Manchester and I would like to have breakfasted and be ready for a start by eight o'clock at latest."

Again the placid features of the lady in black quivered; and though she said nothing, Frau Yorvan pitied her. "Would you not wish, in any case, to have a guide?" she asked. "I could engage you an intelligent young man who—"

"Thank you, no," broke in the girl, decidedly. "A guide-book is preferable to a guide, for what we mean to do. We sha'n't attempt any places which the book says are unsafe for amateurs. But what an excellent engraving that is over the fireplace, with the chamois horns above it. Isn't that a portrait of your Emperor when he was a boy?"

The landlady's eyes darted to the picture. "Ach, I had meant to carry it away," she muttered.

The girl's quick ears caught the words. "Why should you carry it away? Don't you love the Emperor, that you would put his face out of sight?"

"Not love *Unser Leo*?" cried the old woman, horrified. "Why, we worship him, gracious Fräulein; we would die for him, any day, all of us mountain people—and yes, all Rhaetians, I believe. I could not let you go back to your own land with the idea that we do not love the noblest Emperor country ever had. As for what I said about the portrait, I didn't know that I spoke aloud, I am so used to mumbling to myself, since I began to grow deaf and old. But of course, I wished it put away only because it is such a poor thing, it does *Unser Leo* no sort of justice. You—you would not recognize him from that picture, if you were to see him now."

With this excuse, Frau Yorvan hurried out to fetch another dish, which she said must be ready; to cool her hot face, and to scold herself for her stupidity, all the way down-stairs.

She was gone some time; and the girl who had, no doubt unwittingly, occasioned the old woman's uneasiness, took advantage of her absence to laugh, excited, happy laughter.

"Poor, transparent old dear, so pleased and proud of her great secret, which she thinks she's keeping so well!" she exclaimed. "I'm sure she doesn't dream that she's as easy to read as a book with big, big print. She's in a sad fright now, lest we inconvenient foreigners should chance upon her grand gentlemen to-morrow, recognize one of them from the portrait, and spoil his precious incognito."

"Then—you think that *he* is really here—in this out of the way eyrie?" half whispered the Grand Duchess.

"I feel sure he is," answered Princess Virginia.

For a moment there was silence. Then said the Grand Duchess, with an air of resignation, "Well, I suppose we should be glad—since we have come to Rhaetia for the purpose of—dear me, I can scarcely bring myself to say it."

"You may say it, since our dear old lamb of a Letitia knows all about it, and is in with us," returned Virginia. "But—but I truly didn't expect to find him *here*. One knows he comes sometimes; it's been in the papers; but this time they had it that he'd gone to make a week's visit to poor old General von Borslok at the Baths of Melina; and I thought, before we went to Kronburg with all our pretty letters of introduction, as he was away from the palace there, it would be idyllic to use up the time with a visit to Alleheiligen. I don't want you and Letitia to think that I was just making catspaws of you both, and forcing you without knowing, to help me unearth him in his lair. Still, as he *is* here—"

"Perhaps he isn't," suggested the Grand Duchess. "I don't see that you have much ground for fancying so."

"Oh, *ground*!" echoed Virginia, scornfully. "It's instinct that I go upon, not ground. That woman's face when she saw foreign tourists at her door, out of season, when she had a right to think she was safe from invasion. Her stammering about the best rooms being taken; her wish to get rid of us; her distress that she couldn't possibly do so, without making matters worse. The way she talks of her 'four gentlemen.' Her horror at my *lèse majesté*. Her confusion about the portraits; her wish to impress it upon us that *Unser Leo* is quite changed. Instinct ought to be ashamed if it couldn't play detective as far as that. But—of course we may not see him. If she can help it, we won't. He won't like

being run to earth by tourists, when he is amusing himself; and perhaps the trusty landlady will send the intelligent young guide whom I refused, to warn him, so that if he chooses he can keep out of the way."

"I almost hope she may send," said the Grand Duchess. "I don't think Providence wills a meeting here. You have brought no pretty dresses. I *should* like him to see you first when you look your best, since, to your mind, so much depends upon his feelings in this matter."

"Our first meeting is—on the knees of the gods," murmured Virginia.

And then Frau Yorvan came into the room with a soufflé.

CHAPTER III

A CHAMOIS HUNTER

“

This is perfectly appalling!” groaned the unfortunate lady who passed, for this adventure, under the name of Miss Manchester.

“Perfectly glorious!” amended her companion.

The elder lady pressed Baedeker to her bosom, and sat down, with some abruptness. “I shall have to stop here,” she panted, “all the rest of my life, and have my meals and my night things sent up. I’m very sorry. But I’m certain I shall never be able to go back.”

“Don’t be absurd, my poor dear; we’re absolutely safe,” said Virginia. “I may be a selfish wretch, but I wouldn’t for the world have brought you into danger. You needn’t go down yet. Let’s explore a little further. It’s easier than turning back. Surely you can go on. Baedeker says you can. In ten minutes you’ll be at the top of the *col*.”

“You may as well tell me that I’ll be in my grave. It amounts to the same thing,” wailed Miss Manchester, who was, in the sphere of happier duties, Miss Letitia Portman, and had been the Princess’s governess. “I can’t look down; I can’t look up, because I keep thinking of the unspeakable things behind. After I get my breath and have become resigned to my fate, I *may* be comparatively comfortable here, for some years; but as to stirring either way, there’s no use dreaming of it.”

“Well, you’ll make an ideal hermitess,” said Virginia. “You’ve exactly the right features for that profession; austere, yet benevolent. But you’re not really afraid now?”

“Not so much, sitting down,” admitted Miss Portman, slowly regaining her natural color.

“Do you think then, dear, that you’d relapse and lose your head or anything, if I just strolled on alone to the top of the *col* for the view which the guide-book says is so fine, and then came back to organize a relief expedition, say in about half an hour or so?”

“No-o,” said Miss Portman, “I suppose I can bear it. I may as well accustom myself to loneliness, as I am obliged to spend my remaining years on this spot. But I’m not at all sure the Duchess would approve—”

“You mean Lady Mowbray. She wouldn’t mind. She knows I’ve a good head and —physically—a good heart. Besides, I shall have only myself to look after. And one really doesn’t need a chaperon in going to make an early call on a mountain view.”

“Dearest Princess, I’m not so sure of that, in regard to this mountain view.”

“Miss Mowbray, please. You’re very subtle. But I really *haven’t* come out to look for the Mountain View you refer to. You needn’t think it. I don’t know where his lair is, but it’s probably miles from here, and if I knew I wouldn’t hunt him there. That would be *un peu trop fort*; and anyway, I’m inclined to believe that Mother is right about those dresses. I shall have such nice ones at Kronburg! So you see you can conscientiously give me your blessing and let me go.”

“My dear! As if I could have suspected you would search for him! You are in Rhaetia not to pursue, but to give an Emperor, who wishes to have a certain Princess for his consort, a chance to fall in love with herself.”

“If he will—if it can be so. But what do Helen Mowbray and Letitia Manchester know about the love affairs of emperors and princesses? *Au revoir*, dear friend; I’m going. By and by, if you have courage to lift your eyes, you’ll see me waving a handkerchief flag at the rock-corner up there.”

Virginia took the alpenstock which she had laid down, and began picking her way daintily yet pluckily toward the *col* which she had named as her goal. There was another route to it, leading on to the highest peak of the Schneehorn, only to be dared by experienced climbers, but the way by which the girl and her companion had set out from Alleheiligen nearly four hours ago, was merely fatiguing, never dangerous, and Virginia knew that Miss Portman was safe, and not half as much frightened as she pretended.

They had started at eight, just as the September sun had begun to draw the night chill out of the keen mountain air; and now it was close upon twelve. The Princess was hungry.

In Nordeck, the frontier town of Rhaetia as you come in from Germany, she had bought rücksacks for herself and Miss Portman, to be used upon just such

mountain excursions as this; and to-day the brown canvas bags were being tested for the first time. Each rücksack stored an adequate luncheon for its bearer, while on top, secured by straps passed across the shoulders, lay a folded wrap to be used in case of rain.

Virginia's burden grew heavy as she mounted, though at first its weight had seemed trifling. When she had waved her handkerchief at the turning, and passed out of Miss Portman's sight, it occurred to her that it would be clever to lighten the rücksack and satisfy her appetite at the same time.

The one difficulty was that, in her present position, she could not safely unstrap the bag from her shoulders, open it, take out the parcel of luncheon, and strap it on again. The way was too narrow, and the rocks too slippery, to attempt such liberties; at a short distance, however, and only a little out of the path to the *col*, she could see a small green plateau, the very place for a rest. But could she reach it? The girl stood still, and looked wistfully across.

The place could be gained only by a scramble over a ledge of formidable rocks, and climbing in good earnest here and there, yet—if the thing could be done at all, it could be done in ten minutes, and to come back would be comparatively easy. Virginia was tempted.

"The dear Letitia will be eating her own lunch by this time, and won't miss me if my half hour is a long one," she thought. "And anyway, I said half an hour or *so*. That means almost anything, when it comes to an argument."

Another moment, and the girl had started. She was brave at first; but when she had gone half way—a way which was longer and far more difficult than she had fancied—she was conscious of a certain sinking of the heart. She even felt some qualms of sympathy with the sentiments and intentions Miss Portman had expressed, and heartily wished herself back by that good lady's side. But it was against her principles to be conquered, especially when being conquered meant turning coward, or something like it, and she scrambled on obstinately, her cheeks burning, her heart thumping, and her lips pressed together.

What a grim, remorseless giant the mountain was, and what a mere, creeping fly upon its vast shoulder, she! Little cared the old mountain that she was a Royal Princess, and that the Emperor who ruled the land of which it was part, had the intention of marrying her. It would thwart that imperial intention without a qualm, nor turn a pebble if the poor little Princess toppled over its cruel shoulder and fell in a small, crushed heap, without ever having looked upon the face of

the Rhaetian Emperor.

Then there came a later moment when, like Miss Portman, whom she had so recently laughed to scorn, the Princess felt that she could neither go on, nor go back. She was horribly homesick. She wanted her mother and the garden at Hampton Court, and would hardly have thrown a glance of interest at Leopold if he had appeared before her eyes. There were tears in those eyes and she was hating the mountain, and all Rhaetia, with her whole strength, when from the mysterious distance round the corner of the plateau there came the sound of a man's voice, cheerfully yodeling.

Never had a sound been so welcome, or seemed so sweet. It was to Virginia as the voice of an angel. "Help!" she called. "Help!" first in English, and then, on second thoughts, in Rhaetian.

The yodeling abruptly stopped, and a man appeared round a corner of rock beyond the green plateau. The sun shone in his eyes, and he shaded them with his hand to look up at her. Virginia stared, hopefully, expectantly. A glance photographed a tall figure in a gray coat passemoiled with green; a soft green cap of felt; short trousers; bare knees; knitted stockings; nailed boots. Thank heaven, no tourist, but evidently a mountain man, a guide or a chamois hunter, perhaps; at all events, one capable of coming to her rescue. These things she saw and thought, in a flash; and then, the brown hand that had shaded his eyes, dropped. She caught sight of his face.

It was the Emperor.

A moment ago she had felt that she could look at him with indifference, and would a thousand times over prefer a glimpse of the dear old house at Hampton Court, with an easy way to reach it. But now, everything was changed. There was no longer any danger. He was there. He was coming to help her. A Power higher than his had arranged this as their first encounter, and would not have taken the trouble to bring him to her here, if the meeting were to end in ignominy or disaster.

He had run across the plateau; now the nailed boots were ringing on rock. She could gaze down upon his head, he was so close to her. He was looking up. What a noble face it was! Better than all the pictures. And the eyes—

Virginia was suddenly and wildly happy. She could have sung for joy, a song of triumph, and losing her head a little she lost her scant foothold as well, slipped,

tried to hold on, failed, and slid down the steeply sloping rock.

If the man had not sprung forward and caught her, she would probably have rolled over the narrow ledge on which he stood, and gone bounding down, down the mountain side, to her death. But he did catch her, and broke the fall, so that she landed lightly beside him, and within an ace of being on her knees.

After all, it had been a narrow escape; but the man’s arms were so strong, and his eyes so brave, that Virginia scarcely realized the danger she had passed. It seemed so inevitable now, that he must have saved her, that there was room in her thoughts for no dreadful might-have-been. Was it not the One Man sent to her by Destiny, when if this thing had not been meant, since the hour of her birth, it might easily have been some mere tourist, sent by Cook?

She lost her scant foothold, slipped, tried to hold on, failed, and slid down the rock

She lost her scant foothold, slipped, tried to hold on, failed, and slid down the rock

All her life had but led up to this moment. Under the soft hat of green felt adorned with the beard of a chamois, was the face she had seen in dreams. A dark, austere young face it was, with more of Mars than Apollo in its lines, yet to her more desirable than all the ideals of all the sculptors since the world began. He was dressed as a chamois hunter, and there was nothing in the well-worn, almost shabby clothes to distinguish the wearer from the type he chose to represent. But as easily might the eagle to whom in her heart she likened him, try to pass for a barnyard fowl, as this man for a peasant, so thought the Princess.

CHAPTER IV

THE EAGLE'S EYRIE

So she had gone on her knees to him after all—or almost! She was glad her mother did not know. And she hoped that he did not feel the pulsing of the blood in her fingers, as he took her hand and lifted her to her feet. There was shame in this tempest that swept through her veins, because he did not share it; for to her, though this meeting was an epoch, to him it was no more than a trivial incident. She would have keyed his emotions to hers, if she could, but since she had had years of preparation, he a single moment, perhaps she might have been consoled for the disparity, could she have read his eyes. They said, if she had known: "Is the sky raining goddesses to-day?"

Now, what were to be her first words to him? Dimly she felt, that if she were to profit by this wonderful chance to know the man and not the Emperor—this chance which might be lost in a few moments, unless her wit befriended her—those words should be beyond the common. She should be able to marshal her sentences, as a general marshals his battalions, with a plan of campaign for each.

A spirit monitor—a match-making monitor—whispered these wise advices in her ear; yet she was powerless to profit by them. Like a school-girl about to be examined for a scholarship, knowing that all the future might depend upon an hour of the present, the dire need to be resourceful, to be brilliant, left her dumb.

How many times had she not thought of her first conversation with Leopold of Rhaetia, planning the first words, the first looks, which must make him know that she was different from any other girl he had ever met! Yet here she stood, speechless, epigrams turning tail and racing away from her like a troop of playful colts refusing to be caught.

And so it was the Emperor who spoke before Virginia's *savoir faire* came back.

"I hope you're not hurt?" asked the chamois hunter, in the *patois* dear to the heart of Rhaetian mountain folk.

She had been glad before, now she was thankful that she had spent many weeks and months in loving study of the tongue which was Leopold's. It was not the *métier* of a chamois hunter to speak English, though the Emperor was said to know the language well, and she rejoiced in her ability to answer the chamois

hunter as he would be answered, keeping up the play.

“I am hurt only in the pride that comes before a fall,” she replied, forcing a laugh. “Thank you many times for saving me.”

“I feared that I frightened you, and made you lose your footing,” the chamois hunter answered.

“I think on the contrary, if it hadn’t been for you I should have lost my life,” said Virginia. “There should be a sign put up on that tempting plateau, ‘All except suicides beware.’”

“The necessity never occurred to us, my mates and me,” returned the man in the gray coat, passemoiled with green. “Until you came, gna’ Fräulein, no tourist that I know of, has found it tempting.”

Virginia’s eyes lit with a sudden spark. The spirit monitor—that match-making monitor—came back and dared her to a frolic, such a frolic, she thought, as no girl on earth had ever had, or would have, after her. And she could show this grave, soldier-hero of hers, something new in life—something quite new, which it would not harm him to know. Then, let come what would out of this adventure, at worst she should always have an Olympian episode to remember.

“Until *I* came?” she caught up his words, standing carefully on the spot where he had placed her. “But I am no tourist; I am an explorer.”

He lifted level, dark eyebrows, smiling faintly. And when he smiled, half his austerity was gone.

So beautiful a girl as this need not rise beyond agreeable commonplaceness of mind and speech to please a man; indeed, this particular chamois hunter expected no more than good looks, a good heart and a nice manner, from women. Yet this beauty bade fair, it seemed, to hold surprises in reserve.

“I have brought down noble game to-day,” he said to himself; and aloud; “I know the Schneehorn well, and love it well. Still I can’t see what rewards it has for the explorer. Unless, gna’ Fräulein, you are a climber or a geologist.”

“I’m neither; yet I think I have seen something, a most rare thing, I’ve wanted all my life to see.”

The young man’s face confessed curiosity. “Indeed? A rare thing that lives here

on the mountain?”

“I am not sure if it lives here. I should like to find out,” replied the girl.

“Might one inquire the name of this rare thing?” asked the chamois hunter. “Perhaps, if I knew, it might turn out that I could help you in the search. But first, if you’d let me lead you to the plateau, where I think you were going? Here, your head might still grow a little giddy, and it’s not well to keep you standing, gna’ Fräulein, on such a spot. You’ve passed all the worst now. The rest is easy.”

She gave him her hand, pleasing herself by fancying the act a kind of allegory, as she let him lead her to safe and pleasant places, on a higher, sunnier level.

“Perhaps the rare thing grows here,” the chamois hunter went on, looking about the green plateau with a new interest.

“I think not,” Virginia answered, shaking her head. “It would thrive better nearer the mountain top, in a more hidden place than this. It does not love tourists.”

“Nor do I, in truth,” smiled the chamois hunter.

“You took me for one.”

“Pardon, gna’ Fräulein. Not the kind of tourist we both mean.”

“Thank you.”

“But you have not said if I might help you in your search. This is a wild region for a young lady to be exploring in, alone.”

“I feel sure,” responded the Princess, graciously, “that if you really would, you could help me as well as any one in Rhaetia.”

“You are kind indeed to say so, though I don’t know how I have deserved the compliment.”

“Did it sound like a compliment? Well, leave it so. I meant, because you are at home in these high altitudes; and the rare thing I speak of is a plant that grows in high places. It is said to be found only in Rhaetian mountains, though I have never heard of any one who has been able to track it down.”

“Is it our pink Rhaetian edelweiss of which we are so proud? Because if it is, and you will trust me, I know exactly where to take you, to find it. With my help,

you could climb there from here in a few moments."

She shook her head again, smiling inscrutably. "Thank you, it's not the pink edelweiss. The scientific, the esoteric name, I've promised that I'll tell to no one; but the common people in my native country, who have heard of it, would call the plant *Edelmann*."

"You have already seen it on the mountain, but not growing?"

"Some chamois hunter, like yourself, had dropped it, perhaps, not knowing what its value was. It's a great deal to have had one glimpse—worth running into danger for."

"Perhaps, gna' Fräulein, you don't realize to the full the danger you did run. No chance was worth it, believe me."

"You—a chamois hunter—say that."

"But I'm a man. You are a woman; and women should keep to beaten paths and safety."

The Princess laughed. "I shouldn't wonder," said she, "if that's a Rhaetian theory—a Rhaetian *man's* theory. I've heard, your Emperor holds it."

"Who told you that, gna' Fräulein?" He gave her a sharp glance, but her gray eyes looked innocent of guile, and were therefore at their most dangerous.

"Oh, many people have told me. Cats may look at kings, and the most insignificant persons may talk of Emperors. I've heard many things of yours."

"Good things or bad?"

"No doubt such things as he truly deserves. Now can you guess which? But perhaps I would tell you without your guessing, if I were not so very, very hungry." She glanced at the pocket of his coat, from which protruded a generous hunch of black bread and ham—thrust in probably, at the instant when she had called for help. "I can't help seeing that you have your luncheon with you. Do you want it all," (she carefully ignored the contents of her rücksack, which she could not well have forgotten) "or—would you share it?"

The chamois hunter looked surprised, though not displeased. But then, this was his first experience of a feminine explorer, and he quickly rose to the occasion.

“There is more, much more bread and bacon where this came from,” he replied. “Will you be graciously pleased to accept something of our best?”

“If *you* please, then I too shall be pleased,” she said. Guiltily, she remembered Miss Portman. But the dear Letitia could not be considered now. If she were alarmed, she should be well consoled later.

“I and some friends of mine have a—a sort of hut round the corner from this plateau, and a short distance on,” announced the chamois hunter, with a gesture that gave the direction. “No woman has ever been our guest, but I invite you to visit it and lunch there. Or, if you prefer, remain here and in a few minutes I will bring such food as we can offer. At best it’s not much to boast of. We chamois hunters are poor men, living roughly.”

The Princess smiled, imprisoning each new thought of mischief which flew into her mind, like a trapped bird. “I’ve heard you’re rich in hospitality,” she said. “I’ll go with you to your hut, for it will be a chance to prove the saying.”

The eyes of the hunter—dark, brilliant and keen as the eagle’s to which she compared him—pierced hers. “You have no fear?” he asked. “You are a young girl, alone, save for me, in a desolate place. For all you know, my mates and I may be a band of brigands.”

“Baedeker doesn’t mention the existence of brigands in these days, among the Rhaetian Alps,” replied Virginia, with quaint dryness. “I’ve always found him trustworthy. Besides, I’ve great faith in the chivalry of Rhaetian men; and if you knew how hungry I am, you wouldn’t keep me waiting for talk of brigands. Bread and butter are far more to the point.”

“Even search for the rare Edelmann may wait?”

“Yes. The Edelmann may wait—on me.” The last two words she dared but to whisper.

“You must pardon my going first,” said the man with the bare brown knees. “The way is too narrow for politeness.”

“Yet I wish that the peasants at home had such courteous manners as yours,” Virginia patronized him, prettily. “You Rhaetians need not go to court, I see, for lessons in behavior.”

“The mountains teach us something, maybe.”

“Something of their greatness, which we should all do well to learn. But have you never lived in a town?”

“A man of my sort *exists* in a town. He lives in the mountains.” With this diplomatic response, the tall figure swung round a corner formed by a boulder of rock, and Virginia gave a little cry of surprise. The “hut” of which the chamois hunter had spoken was revealed by the turn, and it was of an unexpected and striking description. Instead of the humble erection of stones and wood which she had counted on, the rocky side of the mountain itself had been coaxed to give her sons a shelter.

A doorway, and large square openings for windows, had been cut in the red-veined, purplish-brown porphyry; while a heavy slab of oak, and wooden frames filled full of glittering bottle-glass, protected such rooms as might have been hollowed out within, from storm or cold.

Even had Virginia been ignorant of her host’s identity, she would have been wise enough to guess that here was no Sennhütte, or ordinary abode of common peasants, who hunt the chamois for a precarious livelihood. The work of hewing out in the solid rock a habitation such as this must have cost more than most Rhaetian chamois hunters would save in many a year. But her wisdom also counseled her to express no further surprise after her first exclamation.

“My mates are away for the time, though they may come back by and by,” the man explained, holding the heavy oaken door that she might pass into the room within; and though she was not invited to further exploration, she was able to see by the several doorways cut in the rock walls, that this was not the sole accommodation the strange house could boast.

On the rock floor, rugs of deer and chamois skin were spread; in a rack of oak, ornamented with splendid antlers and studded with the sharp, pointed horns of the chamois, were suspended guns of modern make, and brightly polished, formidable hunting knives. The table in the center of the room had been carved with admirable skill; and the half-dozen chairs were oddly fashioned of stags’ antlers, shaped to hold fur-cushioned, wooden seats. A carved dresser of black oak held a store of the coarse blue, red and green china made by peasants in the valley below, through which Virginia had driven yesterday; and these bright colored dishes were eked out with platters and great tankards of old pewter, while in the deep fireplace a gipsy kettle swung over a bed of fragrant pinewood embers.

“This is a delightful place—fit for a king, or even for an Emperor,” said Virginia, when the bare-kneed chamois hunter had offered her a chair near the fire, and crossed the room to open the closed cupboard under the dresser shelves.

He was stooping as she spoke, but at her last words looked round over his shoulder.

“We mountain men aren’t afraid of a little work—when it’s for our own comfort,” he replied. “And most of the things you see here are home-made, during the long winters.”

“Then you are all very clever indeed. But this place is interesting; tell me, has the Emperor ever been your guest here? I’ve read—let me see, could it have been in a guide-book or in some paper?—that he comes occasionally to this northern range of mountains.”

“Oh yes, the Emperor has been at our hut several times. He’s good enough to approve it.” Her host answered calmly, laying a loaf of black bread, a fine seeded cheese, and a knuckle of ham on the table. He then glanced at his guest, expecting her to come forward; but she sat still on her throne of antlers, her small feet in their sensible mountain boots, daintily crossed under the short tweed skirt.

“I hear he also is a good chamois hunter,” she carelessly went on. “But that, perhaps, is only the flattery which makes the atmosphere of Royalty. No doubt you, for instance, could really give him many points in chamois hunting?”

The young man smiled. “The Emperor’s not a bad shot.”

“For an amateur. But you’re a professional. I wager now, that you wouldn’t for the world change places with the Emperor?”

How the chamois hunter laughed at this, and showed his white teeth! There were those, in the towns he scorned, who would have been astonished at his light-hearted mirth.

“Change places with the Emperor! Not—unless I were obliged, gna’ Fräulein. Not now, at all events,” with a complimentary bow and glance.

“Thank you. You’re quite a courtier. And that reminds me of another thing they say of him in my country. The story is, that he dislikes the society of women. But perhaps it is that he doesn’t understand them.”

“It is possible, lady. But I never heard that they were so difficult of comprehension.”

“Ah, that shows how little you chamois hunters have had time to learn. Why, we can’t even understand ourselves, or know what we’re most likely to do next. And yet—a very odd thing—we have no difficulty in reading one another, and knowing all each other’s weaknesses.”

“That would seem to say that a man should get a woman to choose his wife for him.”

“I’m not so sure it would be wise. Yet your Emperor, we hear, will let the Chancellor choose his.”

“Ah! were you told this also in your country?”

“Yes. For the gossip is that she’s an English Princess. Now, what’s the good of being a powerful Emperor, if he can’t even pick out a wife to please his own taste?”

“I know nothing about such high matters, gna’ Fräulein. But I fancied that Royal folk took wives to please their people rather than themselves. It’s their duty to marry, you know. And if the lady be of Royal blood, virtuous, of the right religion, not too sharp-tempered, and pleasant to look at, why—those are the principal things to consider, I should suppose.”

“So should I *not* suppose, if I were a man, and—Emperor. I should want the pleasure of falling in love.”

“Safer not, gna’ Fräulein. He might fall in love with the wrong woman.” And the chamois hunter looked with half shamed intentness into his guest’s sweet eyes.

She blushed under his gaze, and was so conscious of the hot color, that she retorted at random. “I doubt if he *could* fall in love. A man who would let his Chancellor choose for him! He can have no warm blood in his veins.”

“There I think you wrong him, lady,” the answer came quickly. “The Emperor is —a man. But it may be he has found other interests in his life more important than woman.”

“Bringing down chamois, for instance. You would sympathize there.”

“Chamois give good sport. They’re hard to find. Harder still to hit when you

have found them."

"So are the best types of women. Those who, like the chamois (and the plant I spoke of) live only in high places. Oh, for the sake of my sex, I do hope that some day your Emperor will change his mind—that a woman will *make* him change it."

"Perhaps a woman has—already."

Virginia grew pale. Was she too late? Or was this a concealed compliment which the chamois hunter did not guess she had the clue to find? She could not answer. The silence between the two became electrical, and the young man broke it, at last, with some slight signs of confusion.

"It's a pity," said he, "that our Emperor can't hear you. He might be converted to your views."

"Or he might clap me into prison for *lèse majesté*."

"He wouldn't do that, gna' Fräulein—if he's anything like me."

"Anything like you? Why, now you put me in mind of it, he's not unlike you—in appearance, I mean, judging by his portraits."

"You have seen his portraits?"

"Yes, I've seen some. I really think you must be a little like him, only browner and taller, perhaps. Yet I'm glad that you're a chamois hunter and not an Emperor—almost as glad as *you* can be."

"Will you tell me why, lady?"

"Oh, for one reason, because I couldn't possibly ask him, if he were here in your place, what I'm going to ask of you. You've very kindly laid the bread and ham ready, but you forgot to cut them."

"A thousand pardons. Our talk has set my wits wool-gathering. My mind should have been on my manners, instead of on such far off things as Emperors and their love affairs."

He began hewing at the big loaf as if it were an enemy to be conquered. And there were few in Rhaetia who had ever seen those dark eyes so bright.

"I like ham and bread cut thin, please," said the Princess. "There—that's better.

I'll sit here if you'll bring the things to me, for I find that I'm tired; and you are very kind."

"A draught of our Rhaetian beer will do you more good than anything," suggested the hunter, taking up the plate of bread and ham he had tried hard to cut according to her taste, placing it in her lap and going back to draw a tankard of foaming amber liquid from a quaint hogshead in a corner.

But Virginia waved the froth-crowned pewter away with a smile and a pretty gesture. "My head has already proved not strong enough for your mountains. I'm sure it isn't strong enough for your beer. Have you some nice cold water?"

The young man laughed and shrugged his shoulders. "Our water here is fit only for the outside of the body," he explained. "To us, that's no great deprivation, as we're all true Rhaetians for our beer. But now, on your account, I'm sorry."

"Perhaps you have some milk?" suggested Virginia. "I love milk. And I could scarcely count the cows, they were so many, as I came up the mountain from Alleheiligen."

"It's true there are plenty of cows about," replied her host, "and I could easily catch one. But if I fetch the beast here, can you milk it?"

"Dear me, no; surely you, a great strong man, would never stand by and let a weak girl do that? Oh, I almost wish I hadn't thought of the milk, if I'm not to have it. I long for it so much."

"You shall have the milk, lady," returned the chamois hunter. "I—"

"How good you are!" exclaimed the Princess. "It will be more than nice of you. But—I don't want you to think that I'm giving you all this trouble for nothing. Here's something just to show that I appreciate it; and—to remember me by."

She would not look up, though she longed to see what expression the dark face wore, but kept her eyes upon her hand, from which she slowly withdrew a ring. It fitted tightly, for she had had it made years ago, before her slender fingers had finished growing. When at last she had pulled off the jeweled circlet of gold, she held it up, temptingly.

"What I have done, and anything I may yet do, is a pleasure," said the hunter. "But after all you have learned little of Rhaetia, if you think that we mountain men ever take payment from those to whom we've been able to show

hospitality."

"Ah, but I'm not talking of payment," pleaded the Princess. "I wish only to be sure that you mayn't forget the first woman who, you tell me, has ever entered this door."

The young man looked at the door, not at the girl. "It is impossible that I should forget," said he, almost stiffly.

"Still, it will hurt me if you refuse my ring," went on Virginia. "Please at least come and see what it's like."

He obeyed, and as she still held up the ring, he took it from her that he might examine it more closely.

"The crest of Rhaetia!" he exclaimed, as his eyes fell upon a shield of black and green enamel, set with small, but exceedingly brilliant white diamonds. "How curious. I've been wondering that you should speak our language so well—"

"It's not curious at all, really, but very simple," said Virginia. "Now"—with a faint tremor in her voice—"press the spring on the left side of the shield, and when you've seen what's underneath, I think you'll feel that you can't loyally refuse to accept my little offering."

The bronze forefinger found a pin's point protuberance of gold, and pressing sharply, the shield flew up to reveal a tiny but exquisitely painted miniature of Leopold the First of Rhaetia.

The chamois hunter stared at it, and did not speak, but the blood came up to his brown forehead.

"You're surprised?" asked Virginia.

"I am surprised because I'd been led to suppose that you thought poorly of our Emperor."

"*Poorly!* Now what could have given you that impression?"

"Why, you—made fun of his opinion of women."

"Who am I, pray, to 'make fun' of an Emperor's opinion, even in a matter he would consider so unimportant? On the contrary, I confess that I, like most other girls I know, am deeply interested in your great Leopold, if only because I—we

—would be charitably minded and teach him better. As for the ring, they sell things more or less of this sort, in several of the Rhaetian cities I've passed through on my way here. Didn't you know that?"

"No, lady, I have never seen one like it."

"And as for my knowledge of Rhaetian, I've always been interested in the study of languages. Languages are fascinating to conquer; and then, the literature of your country is so splendid, one must be able to read it at first hand. Now, you'll have to say 'yes' to the ring, won't you, and keep it for your Emperor's sake, if not for mine?"

"May I not keep it for yours as well?"

"Yes, if you please. And—about the milk?"

The chamois hunter caught up a gaudy jug, and without further words, went out. When he had gone, the Princess rose and, taking the knife he had used to cut the bread and ham, she kissed the handle on the place where his fingers had grasped it. "You're a very silly girl, Virginia, my dear," she said. "But oh, how you do love him. How he is *worth* loving, and—what a glorious hour you're having!"

For ten minutes she sat alone, perhaps more; then the door was flung open and her host flung himself in, no longer with the gay air which had sat like a cloak upon him, but hot and sulky, the jug in his hand as empty as when he had gone out.

"I have failed," he said gloomily. "I have failed, though I promised you the milk."

"Couldn't you find a cow?" asked Virginia.

"Oh yes, I found one, more than one, and caught them too. I even forced them to stand still, and grasped them by their udders, but not a drop of milk would come down. Abominable brutes! I would gladly have killed them, but that would have given you no milk."

For her life, the Princess could not help laughing, his air was so desperate. If only those cows could have known who he was, and appreciated the honor!

"Pray, pray don't mind," she begged. "You have done more than most men could have done. After all, I'll have a glass of Rhaetian beer with you, to drink your

health and that of your Emperor. I wonder by the by if he, who prides himself on doing all things well, can milk a cow?"

"If not, he should learn," said the chamois hunter, viciously. "There's no knowing, it seems, when one may need the strangest accomplishments, and be humiliated for lack of them."

"No, not humiliated," Virginia assured him. "It's always instructive to find out one's limitations. And you have been most good to me. See, while you were gone, I ate the slice of bread and ham you cut, and never did a meal taste better. Now, you must have many things to do, which I've made you leave undone. I've trespassed on you too long."

"Indeed, lady, it seems scarcely a moment since you came, and I have no work to do," the chamois hunter insisted.

"But I've a friend waiting for me, on the mountain," the Princess confessed. "Luckily, she had her lunch and will have eaten it, and her guide-book must have kept her happy for a while; but by this time I'm afraid she's anxious, and would be coming in search of me, if she dared to stir. I must go. Will you tell me by what name I shall remember my—rescuer, when I recall this day?"

"They named me—for the Emperor."

"They were wise. It suits you. Then I shall think of you as Leopold. Leopold—what? But no, don't tell me the other name. It *can't* be good enough to match the first; for do you know, I admire the name of Leopold more than any other I've ever heard? So, Leopold, will you shake hands for good-by?"

The strong hand came out eagerly, and pressed hers. "Thank you, gna' Fräulein; but it's not good-by yet. You must let me help you back by the way you came, and down the mountain."

"Will you really? I dared not ask as much, for fear, in spite of your kind hospitality, you were—like your noble namesake—a hater of women."

"That's too hard a word, even for an Emperor, lady. While as for me, if I ever said to myself, 'no woman can be of much good to a man as a real companion,' I'm ready to unsay it."

"I'm glad! Then you shall come with me, and help me; and you shall help my friend, who is so good and so strong-minded that perhaps she may make you

think even better of our sex. If you will, you shall be our guide down to Alleheiligen, where we've been staying at the inn since last night. Besides all that, if you wish to be *very* good, you may carry our cloaks and rücksacks, which seem so heavy to us, but will be nothing for your strong shoulders."

The face of the chamois hunter changed and changed again with such amused appreciation of her demands, that Virginia turned her head away, lest she should laugh, and thus let him guess that she held the key to the inner situation.

His willingness to become a cowherd, and now a beast of burden for the foreign lady he had seen, and her friend whom he had not seen, was indubitably genuine. He was pleased with the adventure—if not as pleased as his initiated companion. For the next few hours the hunter was free, it seemed. He said that he had been out since early dawn, and had had good luck. Later, he had returned to the hut for a meal and a rest, while his friends went down to the village on business which concerned them all. As they had not come back, they were probably amusing themselves, and when he had given the ladies all the assistance in his power, he would join them.

The way down was easy to Virginia, with his hand to help her when it was needed, and she had never been so happy in her twenty years. But, after all, she asked herself, as they neared the place where she had left Miss Portman, what had she accomplished? What impression was she leaving? Would this radiant morning of adventure do her good or harm with Leopold when Miss Mowbray should meet him later, in some conventional way, through letters of introduction to Court dignitaries at Kronburg?

While she wondered, his voice broke into her questionings.

"I hope, gna' Fräulein," the chamois hunter was saying, almost shyly and as if by an effort, "that you won't go away from our country thinking that we Rhaetians are so cold of heart and blood as you've seemed to fancy. We men of the mountains may be different from others you have seen, but we're not more cold. The torrent of our blood may sleep for a season under ice, but when the spring comes—as it must—and the ice melts, then the torrent gushes forth the more hotly because it has not spent its strength before."

"I shall remember your words," said the Princess, "for—my journal of Rhaetia. And now, here's my poor friend. I shall have to make her a thousand excuses."

For her journal of Rhaetia! For a moment the man looked wistful, as if it were a

pain to him that he would have no other place in her thoughts, nor time to win it, since there sat a lady in a tourist's hat, and eye-glasses, and the episode was practically closed. He looked too, as if there was something he would add to his last words if he could; but Miss Portman saw the two advancing figures, and shrieked a shrill cry of thanksgiving.

"Oh, I have been so *dreadfully* anxious!" she groaned, "What *has* kept you? Have you had an accident? Thank heaven you're here. I began to give up hope of ever seeing you again alive."

"Perhaps you never would, if it hadn't been for the help of this good and brave new friend of mine," said Virginia, hurrying into explanations. "I got into dreadful difficulties up there; it was much worse than I thought, but Leopold—" (Miss Portman started, stared with her near-sighted eyes at the tall, brown man with bare knees; colored, gasped, and swallowed hard after a quick glance at her Princess.) "Leopold happened to be near, came to my help and saved me. Wasn't it providential? Oh, I assure you, Leopold is a monarch—of chamois hunters. Give him your cloak and rücksack to carry with mine, dear Miss Manchester. He's kind enough to say that he'll guide us all the way down to Alleheiligen, and I'm glad to accept his service."

Miss Portman—a devout Royalist, and firm believer in the right of kings—grew crimson, her nose especially, as it invariably did at moments of strong emotion.

The Emperor of Rhaetia, here, caught and trapped, like Pegasus bound to the plow, and forced to carry luggage as if he were a common porter—worst of all, *her* insignificant, twice wretched luggage!

She would have protested if she had dared; but she did not dare, and was obliged to see that imperial form—unmistakably imperial, it seemed to her, though masquerading in humble guise—loaded down with her rücksack and her large golf cape, with goloshes in the pocket.

Crushed under the magnitude of her discovery, dazzled by the surprising brilliance of the Princess's capture, stupefied by the fear of saying or doing the wrong thing and ruining her idol's bizarre triumph, poor Miss Portman staggered as Virginia helped her to her feet.

"Why, you're cramped with sitting so long!" cried the Princess. "Be careful! But Leopold will give you his arm. Leopold will take you down, won't you, Leopold?"

And the Imperial Eagle, who had hoped for better things, meekly allowed another link to be added to his chain.

CHAPTER V

LEO VERSUS LEOPOLD

“

Ach, Himmel!” exclaimed Frau Yorvan; and “Ach Himmel!” she exclaimed again, her voice rising to a wail, with a frantic uplifting of the hands.

The Grand Duchess grew pale, for the apple-cheeked lady suddenly exhibited these alarming signs of emotion while passing a window of the private dining-room. Evidently some scene of horror was being enacted outside; and—Virginia and Miss Portman had been away for many hours.

It was the time for tea in England, for coffee in Rhaetia; Frau Yorvan had just brought in coffee for one, with heart-shaped, sugared cakes, which would have appealed more poignantly to the Grand Duchess’s appetite, if the absent ones had been with her to share them. Naturally, at the good woman’s outburst, her imagination instantly pictured disaster to the one she loved.

“What—oh, what is it you see?” she implored, her heart leaping, then falling. But for once, the courtesy due to an honored guest was forgotten, and the distracted Frau Yorvan fled from the room without giving an answer.

Half paralyzed with dread of what she might have to see, the Grand Duchess tottered to the window. Was there—yes, there was a procession, coming down the hilly street that led to town from the mountain. Oh, horror upon horror! They were perhaps bringing Virginia down, injured or dead, her beautiful face crushed out of recognition. Yet no—there was Virginia herself, the central figure in the procession. Thank Heaven, it could be nothing worse than an accident to poor, dear Miss Portman—But there was Miss Portman too; and a very tall, bronzed peasant man, loaded with cloaks and rücksacks, headed the band, while the girl and her ex-governess followed after.

Unspeakably relieved, yet still puzzled and vaguely alarmed, the Grand Duchess threw up the window overlooking the little village square. But as she strove to attract the truants’ attention by waving her hand and crying out a welcome or a question, whichever should come first, the words were arrested on her lips. What could be the matter with Frau Yorvan?

The stout old landlady popped out through the door like a Jack out of his box, on a very stiff spring, flew to the overloaded peasant, and almost rudely elbowing Miss Portman aside, began distractedly bobbing up and down, tearing at the bundle of rücksacks and cloaks. Her inarticulate cries ascended like incense to the Grand Duchess at the open window, adding much to the lady's intense bewilderment.

"What has that man been doing?" demanded the Grand Duchess in a loud, firm voice; but nobody answered, for the very good reason that nobody heard. The attention of all those below was entirely taken up with their own concerns.

"Pray, mein frau, let him carry our things indoors," Virginia was insisting, while the tall man stood among the three women, motionless, but apparently a prey to conflicting emotions. If the Grand Duchess had not been obsessed with a certain idea, which was growing in her mind, she must have seen that his dark face betrayed a mingling of amusement, impatience, annoyance, and boyish mischief. He looked like a man who had somehow stumbled into a false position from which it would be difficult to escape with dignity, yet which he half enjoyed. Torn between a desire to laugh, and fly into a rage with the officious landlady, he frowned warningly at Frau Yorvan, smiled at the Princess, and divided his energies between quick, secret gestures intended for the eyes of the Rhaetian woman, and endeavors to unburden himself in his own time and way, of the load he carried.

With each instant the perturbation of the Grand Duchess grew. Why did the man not speak out what he had to say? Why did the landlady first strive to seize the things from his back, then suddenly shrink as if in fear, leaving the tall fellow to his own devices? Ah, but that was a terrible look he gave her at last—the poor, good woman! Perhaps he was a brigand! And the Grand Duchess remembered tales she had read—tales of fearful deeds, even in these modern days, done in wild, mountain fastnesses, and remote villages such as Alleheiligen. Not in Rhaetia, perhaps; but then, there was no reason why they should not happen in Rhaetia, at a place like this. And if there were not something evil, something to be dreaded about this big, dark-browed fellow, why had Frau Yorvan uttered that exclamation of frantic dismay at sight of him, and rushed like a madwoman out of the house?

It occurred to the Grand Duchess that the man must be some notorious desperado of the mountains, who had obtained her daughter's confidence, or got her and Miss Portman into his power. But, she remembered, fortunately some or

all of the mysterious gentlemen stopping at the inn, had returned and were at this moment assembled in the room adjoining hers. The Grand Duchess resolved that, at the first sign of insolent behavior or threatening on the part of the luggage carrier, these noblemen should be promptly summoned by her to the rescue of her daughter.

Her anxiety was even slightly allayed at this point in her reflections, by the thought (for she had not quite outgrown an innate love of romance) that the Emperor himself might go to Virginia's assistance. His friends were in the next room, having come down from the mountain about noon, and there seemed little doubt that he was among them. If he had not already looked out of his window, drawn by the landlady's excited voice, the Grand Duchess resolved that, in the circumstances, it was her part as a mother to make him look out. She had promised to help Virginia, and she would help her by promoting a romantic first encounter.

In a penetrating voice, which could not fail to reach the ears of the men next door, or the actors in the scene below, she adjured her daughter in English.

This language was the safest to employ, she decided hastily, because the brigand with the rücksacks would not understand, while the flower of Rhaetian chivalry in the adjoining room were doubtless acquainted with all modern languages.

"Helen!" she screamed, loyally remembering in her excitement, the part she was playing, "Helen, where did you come across that ferocious-looking ruffian? Can't you see he intends to steal your rücksacks, or—or blackmail you, or something? Is there no man-servant about the place whom the landlady can call to help her?"

All four of the actors on the little stage glanced up, aware for the first time of an audience; and had the Grand Duchess's eyes been younger, she might have been still further puzzled by the varying and vivid expressions of their faces. But she saw only that the dark-browed peasant man, who had glared so haughtily at poor Frau Yorvan, was throwing off his burden with haste and roughness.

"I do hope he hasn't already stolen anything of value," cried the Grand Duchess. "Better not let him go until you've looked into your rücksacks. Remember that silver drinking cup you *would* take with you—"

She paused, not so much in deference to Virginia's quick reply, as in amazement at Frau Yorvan's renewed gesticulations. Was it possible that the woman

understood more English than her guests supposed, and feared lest the brigand—perhaps equally well instructed—might seek immediate revenge? His bare knees alone were evidence against his character in the eyes of the Grand Duchess. They gave him a brazen, abandoned air; and a young man who cultivated so long a space between stockings and trousers might be capable of any crime.

“Oh, Mother, you’re very much mistaken,” Virginia was protesting. “This man is a great friend of mine, and has saved my life. You must thank him. If it were not for him, I might never have come back to you.”

At last the meaning of her words penetrated to the intelligence of the Grand Duchess, through an armor of misapprehension.

“He saved your life?” she echoed. “Oh, then you have been in danger! Heaven be thanked for your safety—and also that the man’s not likely to know English, or I should never forgive myself for what I’ve said. Here is my purse, dearest. Catch it as I throw, and give it to him just as it is. There are at least twenty pounds in it, and I only wish I could afford more. But what is the matter, my child? You look ready to faint.”

As she began to speak, she snatched from a desk at which she had been writing, a netted silver purse. But while she paused, waiting for Virginia to hold out her hands, the girl forbade the contemplated act of generosity with an imploring gesture.

“He will accept no reward for what he has done, except our thanks; and those I give him once again,” the girl answered. She then turned to the chamois hunter, and made him a present of her hand, over which he bowed with the air of a courtier rather than the rough manner of a peasant. And the Grand Duchess still hoped that the Emperor might be at the window, as really it was a pretty picture, and, it seemed to her, presented a pleasing phase of Virginia’s character.

She eagerly awaited her daughter’s coming, and having lingered at the window to watch with impatience the rather ceremonious leave-taking, she hastened to the door of the improvised sitting-room to welcome the mountaineers, as they returned to tell their adventures.

“My darling, who do you think was listening and looking from the window next ours?” she breathlessly inquired, when she had embraced her newly-restored treasure—for the secret of the adjoining room was too good to keep until questions had been put. “Can’t you guess? I’m surprised at that, since you were

so sure last night of a certain person's presence not far away. Why, who but your Emperor himself!"

The Princess laughed happily, and kissed her mother's pink cheek. "Then he must have an astral body," said she, "since one or the other has been with me all day; and it was to him—or his Doppelgänger—that you offered your purse to make up for accusing him of stealing!"

The Grand Duchess sat down; not so much because she wished to assume a sitting position, as because she experienced a sudden, uncontrollable weakness of the knees. For a moment she was unable to speak, or even to speculate; but one vague thought did trail dimly across her brain. "Heavens! what have I done to him? And maybe some day he will be my son-in-law."

Meanwhile, Frau Yorvan—a strangely subdued Frau Yorvan—had droopingly followed the chamois hunter into the inn.

"My dear old friend, you must learn not to lose that well-meaning head of yours," said he in the hall.

"Oh, but, your Majesty—"

"Now, now, must I remind you again that his Majesty is at Kronburg, or Petersbrück, or some other of his residences, when I am at Alleheiligen? This time I believe he's at the Baths of Melina. If you can't remember these things, I fear I shall be driven away from here, to look for chamois elsewhere than on the Schneehorn."

"Indeed, I will not be so stupid again, your—I mean, I will do my very best not to forget. But never before have I been so tried. To see your high-born, imperial shoulders loaded down as if—as if you had been a common Gepäckträger for tourists, instead of—"

"A chamois hunter. Don't distress yourself, good friend. I've had a day of excellent sport."

"For that I am thankful. But to see your—to see you coming back in such an unsuitable way, has given me a weakness of the heart. How can I order myself civilly to those ladies, who have—"

"Who have given peasant Leopold some hours of amusement. Be more civil than ever, for my sake. And by the way, can you tell me the names of the ladies? That

one of them—a companion, I judge—is a Miss Manchester, I have heard in conversation; but the others—”

“They are mother and daughter—sir. The elder, who in her ignorance, cried out such treasonable abominations from the window (as I could tell even with the little English I have picked up) is Lady Mowbray. I have seen the name written down; and I know how to speak it because I have heard it pronounced by the companion, the Mees Manchester. The younger—the beautiful one—is also a Mees—and the mother calls her Hélène. They talk together in English, also in French, and though I have so few words of either language, I could tell that London was mentioned between them more than once, while I waited on the table. Besides, it is painted in black letters on their traveling boxes.”

“You did not expect their arrival?”

“Oh, no, sir. Had they written beforehand, at this season, when I generally expect to be honored by your presence, I should have answered that the house was full—or closed—or any excuse which occurred to me, to keep strangers away. But none have ever before arrived so late in the year, and I was taken all unawares when my son Alois drove them up last night. He did not know you had arrived, as the papers spoke so positively of your visit to the Baths; and I could not send travelers away; you have bidden me not to do so, once they are in the house. But these ladies are here but for a day or two more, on their way to Kronburg for a visit; and I thought—”

“You did quite right, Frau Yorvan. Has my messenger come up with letters?”

“Yes, your—yes, sir. Just now also a telegram was brought by another messenger, who came and left in a great hurry.”

The chamois hunter shrugged his shoulders, and sighed an impatient sigh. “It’s too much to expect that I should be left in peace for a single day, even here,” he muttered, as he went toward the stairs.

To reach Frau Yorvan’s best sitting-room (selfishly occupied, according to one opinion, by four men absent all day on a mountain), he was obliged to pass by a door through which issued unusual sounds. So unusual were they, that the Emperor paused.

Some one was striking the preliminary chords of a volkslied on his favorite instrument, a Rhaetian variation of the zither. As he lingered, listening, a voice

began to sing—ah, but a voice!

Softly seductive it was as the cooing of a dove in the spring, to its mate; pure as the purling of a brook among meadow flowers; rich as the deep notes of a nightingale in his passion for the moon. And for the song, it was the heart-breaking cry of a young Rhaetian peasant who, lying near death in a strange land, longs for one ray of sunrise light on the bare mountain tops of the homeland, more earnestly than for his first sight of an unknown Heaven.

The man outside the door did not move until the voice was still. He knew well, though he could not see, who the singer had been. It was impossible for the plump lady at the window, or the thin lady with the glasses, to own a voice like that. It was the girl's. She only, of the trio, could so exhale her soul in the very perfume of sound. For to his fancy, it was like hearing the fragrance of a rose breathed aloud. "I have heard an angel," he said to himself. But in reality he had heard Princess Virginia of Baumenburg-Drippe, showing off her very prettiest accomplishment, in the childish hope that the man she loved might hear.

Leopold of Rhaetia had heard many golden voices—golden in more senses of the word than one—but never before, it seemed to him, a voice which so stirred his spirit with pain that was bitter-sweet, pleasure as blinding as pain, and a vague yearning for something beautiful which he had never known.

If he had been asked what that something was, he could not, if he would, have told; for a man cannot explain that part of himself which he has never even tried to understand.

Before he had moved many paces from the door, the lovely voice, no longer plaintive, but swelling to brilliant triumph, broke into the national anthem of Rhaetia—warlike, inspiring as the Marseillaise, but wilder, calling her sons to face death singing, in the defense.

"She's an English girl, yet she sings our Rhaetian music as no Rhaetian woman I have ever heard, can sing it," he told himself, slowly passing on to his own door. "She is a new type to me. I don't think there can be many like her. A pity that she is not a Princess, or else—that Leopold the Emperor and Leo the chamois hunter are not two men. Still, the chamois hunter of Rhaetia would be no match for Miss Mowbray of London, so the weights would balance in the scales as unevenly as now."

He gave a sigh, and a smile that lifted his eyebrows. Then he opened the door of

his sitting-room, to forget among certain documents which urged the importance of an immediate return to duty, the difference between Leopold and Leo, the difference between women and a Woman.

“Good-by to our mountains, to-morrow morning,” he said to his three chosen companions. “Hey for work and Kronburg.”

She was going to Kronburg in a few days, according to Frau Yorvan. But Kronburg was not Alleheiligen; and Leopold, the Emperor, was not, at his palace, in the way of meeting tourists—or even “explorers.”

“She’ll never know to whom she gave her ring,” he thought with the dense innocence of a man who has studied all books save women’s looks. “And I’ll never know who gives her a plain gold one for the finger on which she once wore this.”

But in the next room, divided from him by a single wall, sat Princess Virginia of Baumenburg-Drippe.

“When we meet again at Kronburg, he mustn’t dream that I knew all the time,” she was saying to herself. “That would spoil everything—just at first. Yet oh, some day how I should love to confess all—all! Only I couldn’t possibly confess except to a man who would excuse, or perhaps even approve, because he had learned to love me—well. And what shall I do, how shall I bear my life now I’ve seen him, if that day should never come?”

CHAPTER VI

NOT IN THE PROGRAM

Letters of introduction for Lady Mowbray and her daughter to influential and interesting persons attached to the Rhaetian Court, were necessarily a part of the wonderful plan connected in the English garden, though they were among the details thought out afterwards.

The widow of the Hereditary Grand Duke of Baumenburg-Drippe was reported in the journals of various countries, to be traveling with the Princess Virginia and a small suite, through Canada and the United States; and fortunately for the success of the innocent plot, the Grand Duchess had spent so many years of seclusion in England, and had, even in her youth, met so few Rhaetians, that there was little fear of detection. Her objections to Virginia's scheme for winning a lover instead of thanking Heaven quietly for a mere husband, were based on other grounds, but Virginia had overcome them, and eventually the Grand Duchess had proved not only docile, but positively fertile in expedient.

The choosing of the borrowed flag under which to sail had at first been a difficulty. It was pointed out by a friend taken into their confidence (a lady whose husband had been ambassador to Rhaetia), that a real name, and a name of some dignity, must be adopted, if proper introductions were to be given. And it was the Grand Duchess who suggested the name of Mowbray, on the plea that she had, in a way, the right to annex it.

The mother of the late Duke of Northmoreland had been a Miss Mowbray, and there were still several eminently respectable, inconspicuous Mowbray cousins. Among these cousins was a certain Lady Mowbray, widow of a baron of that ilk, and possessing a daughter some years older and innumerable degrees plainer than the Princess Virginia.

To this Lady Mowbray the Grand Duchess had gone out of her way to be kind in Germany, long years ago, when she was a very grand personage indeed, and Lady Mowbray comparatively a nobody. The humble connection had expressed herself as unspeakably grateful, and the two had kept up a friendship ever since. Therefore, when the difficulty of realism in a name presented itself, the Grand Duchess thought of Lady Mowbray and Miss Helen Mowbray. They were about to leave England for India, but had not yet left; and the widow of the Baron was

flattered as well as amused by the romantic confidence reposed in her by the widow of the Grand Duke. She was delighted to lend her name, and her daughter's name; and who could blame the lady if her mind rushed forward to the time when she should have earned gratitude from the young Empress of Rhaetia? for of course she had no doubt of the way in which the adventure would end.

As for the wife of the late British Ambassador to the Rhaetian Court, she was not sentimental and therefore was not quite as comfortably sure of the sequel. As far as concerned her own part in the plot, however, she felt safe enough; for though she was, after a fashion, deceiving her old acquaintances at Kronburg, she was not foisting adventuresses upon them; on the contrary, she was giving them a chance of entertaining angels unawares, by sending them letters to ladies who were in reality the Grand Duchess of Baumenburg-Drippe and the Princess Virginia.

The four mysterious gentlemen left Alleheiligen the day after Virginia's encounter with the chamois hunter; but the Mowbrays lingered on. The adventure had begun so gloriously that the girl feared an anti-climax for the next step. Though she longed for the second meeting, she dreaded it as well, and put off the chance of it from day to day. The stay of the Mowbrays at Alleheiligen lengthened into a week, and when they left at last, it was only just in time for the great festivities at Kronburg, which were to celebrate the Emperor's thirty-first birthday, an event enhanced in national importance by the fact that the eighth anniversary of his coronation would fall on the same date.

On the morning of the journey, the Grand Duchess had neuralgia and was frankly cross.

"I don't see after all, what you've accomplished so far by this mad freak which has dragged us across Europe," she said, fretfully, in the train which they had taken at a town twenty miles from Alleheiligen. "We've perched on a mountain top, like the Ark on Ararat, for a week, freezing; the adventure you had there is only a complication. What have we to show for our trouble—unless incipient rheumatism?"

Virginia had nothing to show for it; at least, nothing that she meant to show, even to her mother; but in a little scented bag of silk which lay next her heart, was folded a bit of blotting-paper. If you looked at its reflection in a mirror, you saw, written twice over in a firm, individual hand, the name "Helen Mowbray."

The Princess had found it on a table in the best sitting-room, after Frau Yorvan had made that room ready for its new occupants. Therefore she loved Alleheiligen: therefore she thought with redoubled satisfaction of her visit there.

To learn her full name, he must have thought it worth while to make inquiries. It had lingered in his thoughts, or he would not have scrawled it twice on some bit of paper—since destroyed no doubt—in a moment of idle dreaming.

Through most of her life, Virginia had known the lack of money; but she would not have exchanged a thousand pounds for the contents of that little bag.

Hohenlangenwald is the name of the House from which the rulers of Rhaetia sprang; therefore everything in the beautiful city of Kronburg which can take the name of Hohenlangenwald, has taken it; and it was at the Hohenlangenwald Hotel that a suite of rooms had been engaged for Lady Mowbray.

The travelers broke the long journey at Melinabad; and Virginia's study of trains had timed their arrival in Kronburg for the morning of the birthday eve, early enough for the first ceremony of the festivities; the unveiling by the Emperor of a statue of Rhaetia in the Leopoldplatz, directly in front of the Hohenlangenwald Hotel.

Virginia looked forward to seeing the Emperor from her own windows; as according to her calculation, there was an hour to spare; but at the station they were told by the driver of the carriage sent to meet them, that the crowd in the streets being already very great, he feared it would be a tedious undertaking to get through. Some of the thoroughfares were closed for traffic; he would have to go by a roundabout way; and in any case could not reach the main entrance of the hotel. At best, he would have to deposit his passengers and their luggage at a side entrance, in a narrow street.

As the carriage started, from far away came a burst of martial music; a military band playing the national air which the chamois hunter had heard a girl sing, behind a closed door at Alleheiligen.

The shops were all shut—would be shut until the day after to-morrow, but their windows were unshuttered and gaily decorated, to add to the brightness of the scene. Strange old shops displayed the marvelous, chased silver, the jeweled weapons and gorgeous embroideries from the far eastern provinces of Rhaetia; splendid new shops rivaled the best of the Rue de la Paix in Paris. Gray medieval buildings made wonderful backgrounds for drapery of crimson and blue, and

garlands of blazing flowers. Modern buildings of purple-red porphyry and the famous honey-yellow marble of Rhaetia, fluttered with flags; and above all, in the heart of the town, between old and new, rose the Castle Rock. Virginia's pulses beat, as she saw the home of Leopold for the first time, and she was proud of its picturesqueness, its riches and grandeur, as if she had some right in it, too.

Ancient, narrow streets, and wide new streets, were alike arbors of evergreen and brilliant blossoms. Prosperous citizens in their best, inhabitants of the poorer quarters, and stalwart peasants from the country, elbowed and pushed each other good-naturedly, as they streamed toward the Leopoldplatz. Handsome people they were, the girl thought, her heart warming to them; and to her it seemed that the very air tingled with expectation. She believed that she could feel the magnetic thrill in it, even if she were blind and deaf, and could hear or see nothing of the excitement.

"We must be in time—we shall be in time!" she said to herself. "I shall lean out from my window and see him."

But at the hotel, which they did finally reach, the girl had to bear a keen disappointment. With many apologies the landlord explained that he had done his very best for Lady Mowbray's party when he received their letter a fortnight before, and that he had allotted them a good suite, with balconies overlooking the river at the back of the house—quite a venetian effect, as her ladyship would find. But, as to rooms at the front, impossible! All had been engaged fully six weeks in advance. One American millionaire was paying a thousand gulden solely for an hour's use of a small balcony, to-day for the unveiling and again to-morrow for the street procession. Virginia was pale with disappointment. "Then I'll go down into the crowd and take my chance of seeing something," she said to her mother, when they had been shown into handsome rooms, satisfactory in everything but situation. "I must hurry, or there'll be no hope."

"My dear child, impossible for you to do such a thing!" exclaimed the Grand Duchess. "I can't think of allowing it. Fancy what a crush there will be. All sorts of creatures trampling on each other for places. Besides, you could see nothing."

"Oh, Mother," pleaded the Princess, in her softest, sweetest voice—the voice she kept for extreme emergencies of cajoling. "I couldn't *bear* to stay shut up here while that music plays and the crowds shout themselves hoarse for *my* Emperor. Besides, it's the most curious thing—I feel as if a voice kept calling to me that I must be there. Miss Portman and I'll take care of each other. You *will* let me go,

won’t you?”

Of course the Grand Duchess yielded, her one stipulation being that the two should keep close to the hotel; and the Princess urged her reluctant companion away without waiting to hear her mother’s last counsels.

Their rooms were on the first floor, and the girl hurried eagerly down the broad flight of marble stairs, Miss Portman following dutifully upon her heels.

They could not get out by way of the front door, for people had paid for standing room there, and would not yield an inch, even for an instant; while the two or three steps below, and the broad pavement in front were as closely blocked.

Matters began to look hopeless, but Virginia would not be daunted. They tried the side entrance and found it free, the street into which it led being comparatively empty; but just beyond, where it ran into the great open square of the Leopoldplatz, there was a solid wall of sight-seers.

“We might as well go back,” said Miss Portman, who had none of the Princess’s keenness for the undertaking. She was tired after the journey, and for herself, would rather have had a cup of tea than see fifty emperors unveil as many statues by celebrated sculptors.

“Oh no!” cried Virginia. “We’ll get to the front, somehow, sooner or later, even if we’re taken off our feet. Look at that man just ahead of us. *He* doesn’t mean to turn back. He’s not a nice man, but he’s terribly determined. Let’s keep close to him, and see what he means to do; then, maybe, we shall be able to do it as well.”

Miss Portman glanced at the person indicated by a nod of the Princess’s head. Undismayed by the mass of human beings that blocked the Leopoldplatz a few yards ahead, he walked rapidly along without the least hesitation. He had the air of knowing exactly what he wanted to do, and how to do it. Even Miss Portman, who had no imagination, saw this by his back. The set of the head on the shoulders was singularly determined, and the walk revealed a consciousness of importance accounted for, perhaps, by the gray and crimson uniform which might be that of some official order. On the sleek, black head was a large cocked hat, adorned with an eagle’s feather, fastened in place by a gaudy jewel, and this hat was pulled down very far over the face.

“Perhaps he knows that they’ll let him through,” said Miss Portman. “He seems

to be a dignitary of some sort. We can't do better, if you're determined to go on, than keep near him."

"He has the air of being ready to die," whispered Virginia, for they were close to the man now.

"How can you tell? We haven't seen his face," replied the other, in the same cautious tone.

"No. But look at the back of his neck, and his ears."

Miss Portman looked and gave a little shiver. She would never have thought of observing it, if her attention had not been called by the Princess. But it was true. The back of the man's neck and his ears were of a ghastly, yellow white.

"Horrid!" she ejaculated. "He's probably dying of some contagious disease. Do let's get away from him."

"No, no," said Virginia. "He's our only hope. They're going to let him pass through. Listen."

Miss Portman listened, but as she understood only such words of Rhaetian as she had picked up in the last few weeks, she could merely surmise that he was ordering the crowd out of his way because he had a special message from the Lord Chancellor to the Burgomaster.

The human wall opened; the man darted through, and Miss Portman was dragged after him by the Princess. So close to him had they kept, that they might easily be supposed to be under his escort; and in any case, they passed before there was time to dispute their right of way.

“It must be the secretary of Herr Koffman, the new Burgomaster,” Virginia heard one man say to another. “And those ladies are with him.”

On and on, through the crowd, passed the man in gray and crimson, oblivious of the two women who were using him. There was something about that disagreeable back of his which proclaimed him a man of but one idea at a time. Close to the front line of spectators, however, there came a check. People were vexed at the audacity of the girl and the elderly woman, and would have pushed them back, but at the critical second the blue and silver uniformed band of Rhaetia’s crack regiment, the Imperial Life Guards, struck up an air which told that the Emperor was coming. Promptly the small group concerned forgot its grievance, in excitement, crowding together so that Virginia was pressed to the front, and only Miss Portman was pushed ruthlessly into the background.

The poor lady raised a feeble protest in English, which nobody heeded, unless it were the man who had inadvertently acted as pioneer. At her shrill outburst he turned quickly, as if startled by the sudden cry, and Virginia was so close to him that her chin almost touched his shoulder. For the first time she had a glimpse of his face, which matched the yellow wax of his neck in pallor.

The girl shrank away from him involuntarily. “What a death’s head!” she thought. “A sly, wicked face, and awful eyes. He looks frightened. I wonder why!”

Assured that the sharp cry did not concern him, the man turned to the front again, and having obtained his object—a place in the foremost rank of the crowd, with one incidentally for the Princess—he proceeded to take from his breast a roll of parchment, tied with a narrow ribbon, and sealed with a large red seal. As he drew it out, and rearranged his coat, his hand trembled. It, too, was yellow white. The fellow seemed to have no blood in him.

Virginia, standing now shoulder to shoulder with the man in gray and crimson, had just time to feel a stirring of dislike and perhaps curiosity, when a great cheer arose from thousands of throats. The square rang with a roar of loyal acclamation; men waved tall hats, soft hats, and green peasant hats with feathers. Beautifully dressed women grouped on the high, decorated balconies waved handkerchiefs or scattered roses from gilded baskets; women in gorgeous costumes from far-off provinces held up half-frightened, half-laughing children; and then a white figure on a white charger came riding into the square under the triumphal arch wreathed with flags and flowers.

Other figures followed; men in uniforms of green and gold and red, on coal black horses, yet Virginia saw only the white figure, shining, wonderful.

Under the glittering helmet of steel with its gold eagle, the dark face was clear-cut as a cameo, and the eyes were bright with a proud light. To the crowd, he was the Emperor; a fine, popular, brilliant young man, who ruled his country better than it had been ruled yet by one of his House, and above all, provided many a pleasing spectacle for the people. But to Virginia he was far more; an ideal Sir Galahad, or a St. George strong and brave to slay all dragon-wrongs which might threaten his wide land.

“What if he should never love me?” was the one sharp thought which pierced her pride of him.

The people were proud, too, as he sat there controlling the white war-horse with its gold and silver trappings, the crusted jewels of many Orders sparkling on his breast, while he saluted his subjects, in his soldier’s way.

For a moment there was a pause, save for a shouting, which rose and rose again; then he alighted, whereupon important looking men with ribbons and decorations came forward bowing, to receive the Emperor. The ceremony of unveiling the statue of Rhaetia was about to begin.

To reach the great crimson-draped platform on which he was to stand, the Emperor must pass within a few yards of Virginia. His gaze flashed over the gay crowd. What if it should rest upon her? The girl’s heart was in her throat. She could feel it beating there; and for a moment the tall, white figure was lost in a mist which dimmed her eyes.

She had forgotten how she came to this place of vantage, forgotten the pale man in gray and red to whom she owed her good fortune; but suddenly, while her heart was at its loudest, and the mist before her eyes at its thickest, she grew conscious again of his existence, poignantly conscious of his close presence. So near her he stood that a quick start, a gathering of his muscles for a spring, shot like an electric message through her own body.

The mist was burnt up in the flame of a strange enlightenment, a clarity of vision which showed, not only the hero of the day, the throng, and the wax-white man beside her, but something which was in the soul of that man as well.

“He is going to kill the Emperor.”

It was as if a voice spoke the words in her ear. She knew now why she had struggled to win this place, why she had succeeded, what she had to do—or die in failing to do.

Leopold was not half a dozen yards away, and was coming nearer. No one but Virginia suspected evil. She alone had felt the thrill of a murderer's nerves, the tense spring of his muscles. She alone guessed what the roll of parchment hid.

"Now—now!" the voice seemed to whisper again, and she had no fear.

While the crowd shouted wildly for "Unser Leo!" a man in gray and red leaped, catlike, at the white figure that advanced. Something sharp and bright flashed out from a roll of parchment, catching the sun in a streak of steely light.

"Let the law deal with the madman; it is my will"
"Let the law deal with the madman; it is my will"

Leopold saw, but not in time to swerve. The crowd shrieked, rushed forward, too late, and the blade would have drunk his life, had not the girl who had felt all, seen all, struck up the arm before it fell.

The rest was darkness for her. She knew only that she was sobbing, and that the great square with its crowded balconies, its ropes of green, its waving flags, seemed to collapse upon her and blot her out.

It was Leopold who caught her as she swayed: and while the people surged around the thwarted murderer, the Emperor sprang up the steps of the great crimson platform, with the girl against his heart.

It was her blood that stained the pure white of his uniform, the blood from her arm wounded in his defense. And holding her up he stood dominating the crowd.

Down there at the foot of the steps, the man in gray and red was like a spent fox among the hounds, and Leopold's people in the fury of their rage would have torn him in pieces as the hounds tear the fox, despite the cordon of police that gathered round him. But the voice of the Emperor bade his subjects fall back.

"My people shall not be assassins," he cried to them. "Let the law deal with the madman; it is my will. Look at me, alive and unhurt. Now, give your cheers for

the lady who has saved my life, and the ceremonies shall go on.”

Three cheers, had he said? They gave three times three, and bade fair to split the skies with shouts for the Emperor. While women laughed and wept and all eyes were upon that noble pair on the red platform, something limp and gray was hurried out of sight and off to prison. On a signal the national anthem began; the voices of the people joined the brass instruments. All Kronburg was singing; or asking “Who is she?” of the girl at the Emperor’s side.

CHAPTER VII

THE HONORS OF THE DAY

It is those in the thick of the battle who can afterwards tell least about it; and to the Princess those five minutes—moments the most tremendous, the most vital of her life—were afterwards in memory like a dream.

She had seen that a man was ghastly pale; she had caught a gleam of fear in his eye; she had felt a tigerish quiver run through his frame as the crowd pressed him against her. Instinct—and love—had told her the rest, and taught her how to act.

Vaguely she recalled later, that she had thrown herself forward and struck up the knife. An impression of that knife as the light gleamed on it, alone was clear. Sickening, she had thought of the dull sound it would make in falling, of the blood that would spout from a rent in the white coat, among the jeweled orders. She had thought, as one thinks in dying, of existence in a world empty of Leopold, and she had known that unless he could be saved, her one wish was to go out of the world with him.

More than this she had not thought or known. What she did was done scarcely by her own volition, and she seemed to wake with a start at last, to hear herself sobbing, and to feel the throb, throb, of a hot pain in her arm.

A hundred hands—not quick enough to save, yet quick enough to follow the lead given by her—had fought to seize the man in gray, and stop a second blow. They had borne him away; while as for Virginia, her work done, she forgot everything and every one but Leopold.

Reviving, she had heard him speak to the crowd, and told herself dreamily that, were she dying, his voice could bring her back if he called. She even listened to each word that rang out like a cathedral bell, above the babel. Still he held her, and when the cheers came, she scarcely understood that they were for her as well as for Leopold the Emperor. Afterwards, the necessity for public action over, he bent his head close enough to whisper, “Thank you”; and then for Virginia every syllable was clear.

“You are the bravest woman alive,” he said. “I had to keep them from killing that ruffian, but now I can speak to you alone. I thank you for what you did, with my

whole heart, and I pray Heaven you're not seriously hurt."

"No, not hurt, and very happy," the Princess answered, hardly knowing what she said. She felt like a soul released from its body, floating in blue ether. What could it matter if that body ached or bled? Leopold was safe, and she had saved him.

He pointed to her sleeve. "The knife struck you. Your arm's bleeding, and the wound must be seen immediately by my own surgeon. Would that I could go with you myself, but duty keeps me here; you understand that. Baron von Lyndal and his wife will at once take you home, wherever you may be staying. They—"

"But I would rather stop and see the rest," said Virginia. "I'm quite well now, not even weak, and I can go down to my friend—"

"If you're able to stop, it must be here with me," answered Leopold. "After the service you have done for me and for the country, it is your place."

The ladies of the court, who, with their husbands, had been waiting to congratulate Leopold, crowded round the girl as the Emperor turned to them with a look and gesture of invitation. A seat was given her, and the arm in its blood-stained sleeve was hastily bound up. She was the heroine of the day, dividing honors with its hero.

There was scarcely a *grande dame* among the brilliant assemblage on the Emperor's platform, to whom Lady Mowbray and her daughter had not a letter of introduction, from their invaluable friend. But no one knew at this moment of any title to their recognition possessed by the girl, other than the right she had earned by her splendid deed. All smiled on her through grateful tears, though there were some who would have given their ten fingers to have stepped into her place.

Thus Virginia sat through the ceremonies, careless that thousands of eyes were on her face, thinking only of one pair of eyes, which spared a glance for her now and then; hardly seeing the statue of Rhaetia whose glorious marble womanhood unveiled roused a storm of enthusiasm from the crowd; hearing only the short, stirring speech made by Leopold.

When everything was over, and the people had no excuse to linger save to see the Emperor ride away and the great personages disperse, Leopold turned again to Virginia.

All the world was listening, of course; all the world was watching, too; and no matter what his inclination might have been, his words could be but few.

Once more he thanked and praised her for her courage, her presence of mind; thanked her for remaining, as if she had been granting a favor to him; and asked where she was stopping, in Kronburg as he promised himself the honor of sending to inquire for her health that evening.

His desire would be to call at once in person, he added, but, owing to the program arranged for this day and several days to follow, not only each hour but each moment would be officially occupied. These birthday festivities were troublesome, but duly must be done. And then, Leopold repeated (when he had Miss Mowbray's name and address), the court surgeon and physician would be commanded to attend upon her without delay.

With these words and a chivalrous courtesy at parting, the Emperor was gone, Baron von Lyndal, Grand Master of Ceremonies, and his Baroness having been told off to take care of Miss Mowbray.

In another mood it would have pricked Virginia's sense of humor to see Baroness von Lyndal's almost shocked surprise at discovering her to be the daughter of that Lady Mowbray whom she was asked to meet. (Luckily all the letters of introduction had reached their destination, it merely remaining, according to etiquette in Rhaetia, for Lady Mowbray to announce her arrival in Kronburg by sending cards to the recipients.) But Virginia had no heart for laughter now.

She had been on the point of forgetting, until reminded by a dig from the spur of necessity, that she was only a masquerader, acting her borrowed part in a pageant. For the first time since she had hopefully taken it up, that part became detestable. She would have given almost anything to throw it off, and be herself: for nothing less than clear sincerity seemed worthy of this day and the event which crowned it.

Nevertheless, in the vulgar language of proverb which no well brought-up Princess should ever stoop to use, she had made her own bed, and she must lie in it. It would not do for her suddenly to give out to the world of Kronburg that she was not, after all, Miss Mowbray, but Princess Virginia of Baumenburg-Drippe. That would not be fair to the Grand Duchess, who had yielded to her wishes, nor fair to her own plans. Above all, it would not be fair to the Emperor, handicapped as he now was by a debt of gratitude. No; Miss Mowbray she was,

and Miss Mowbray she must for the present remain.

Naturally the Grand Duchess fainted when her daughter was brought back with ominous red stains upon the gray background of her traveling dress. But the wound was neither deep nor dangerous. The court surgeon was as consoling as he was complimentary, and by the time that messengers from the palace had arrived with inquiries from the Emperor and invitations to the Emperor's ball, the mother of the heroine could dispense with her sal volatile.

She had fortunately much to think of. There was the important question of dress for the ball to-morrow night; there was the still more pressing question of the newspapers, which must not be allowed to publish the borrowed name of Mowbray, lest complications should arise; and there were the questions to be asked of Virginia. How had she felt? How had she dared? How had the Emperor looked, and what had the Emperor said?

If it had been natural for the Grand Duchess to faint, it was equally natural that she should not faint twice. She began to believe, after all, that Providence smiled upon Virginia and her adventure; and she wondered whether the Princess's white satin embroidered with seed pearls, or the silver spangled blue tulle would be more becoming to wear to the ball.

Next day the Rhaetian newspapers devoted columns to the attack upon the Emperor by an anarchist from a certain province (once Italian), who had disguised himself as an official in the employ of the Burgomaster. There were long paragraphs in praise of the lady who, with marvelous courage and presence of mind, had sprung between the Emperor and the assassin, receiving on the arm with which she had shielded *Unser Leo* a glancing blow from the weapon aimed at the Imperial breast. But, thanks to a few earnestly imploring words written by "Lady Mowbray" to Baron von Lyndal, commands impressed upon the landlord of the hotel, and the fact that Rhaetian editors are not as modern as Americans in their methods, the lady was not named. She was a foreigner and a stranger to the capital of Rhaetia; she was, according to the papers, "as yet unknown."

CHAPTER VIII

THE EMPEROR’S BALL

Not a window of the fourteenth century, yellow marble palace on the hill, with its famous Garden of the Nine Fountains, that was not ablaze with light, glittering against a far-away background of violet mountains crowned by snow.

Outside the tall, bronze gates where marble lions crouched, the crowd who might not pass beyond stared, chattered, pointed and exclaimed, without jealousy of their betters. *Unser Leo* was giving a ball, and it was enough for their happiness to watch the slow moving line of splendid state coaches, gorgeous automobiles, and neat broughams with well-known crests upon their doors; to strive good-naturedly for a peep at the faces and dresses, the jewels and picturesque uniforms; to comment upon all freely but never impudently, asking one another what would be for supper, and with whom the Emperor would dance.

“There she is—there’s the beautiful young foreign lady who saved him!” cried a girl in the throng. “I was there and saw her, I tell you. Isn’t she an angel?”

Instantly a hearty cheer went up, growing in volume, and the green-coated policemen had to keep back the crowd that would have stopped the horses and pressed close for a long look into a plain, dark-blue brougham.

Virginia shrank out of sight against the cushions, blushing, and breathing quickly as she caught her mother’s hand.

“Dear people,—dear, kind people,” she thought. “I love them for loving him. I wonder, oh I wonder, if they will ever see me and cheer me, driving by his side?”

She had chosen to wear the white dress with the pearls, though up to the last moment the Grand Duchess had suffered tortures of indecision between that and the blue, to say nothing of a pink chiffon trimmed with crushed roses. Before the carriage brought them to the palace doors, the girl’s blush had faded, and her face was as white as her gown when at her mother’s side she passed between bowing lackeys through the marble Hall of Lions, on through the frescoed Rittersaal to the throne room where the Emperor’s guests awaited his coming.

It was etiquette not to arrive a moment later than ten o’clock; and a few minutes after the hour Baron von Lyndal, in his official capacity as Grand Master of

Ceremonies, struck the polished floor twice with his gold-knobbed wand of ivory. This signaled the approach of the court from the Imperial dinner party, and Leopold entered, with a stout, middle-aged Royal Highness from Russia on his arm.

Until his arrival the beautiful Miss Mowbray had held all eyes; and even when he appeared, she was not forgotten. Every one was on tenter hooks to see how she would be greeted by the grateful Emperor.

The instant that his dark head towered above other heads in the throne room, it was observed even by those not usually observant, that never had Leopold been so handsome.

His was a face remarkable for intellect and firmness rather than for classical beauty of feature, though his features were strong and clearly cut; but to-night the sternness that sometimes marred them in the eyes of women was smoothed away. He looked young and ardent, almost boyish, like a man who has suddenly found an absorbing new interest in life.

The first dance he went through with the Russian Royalty, who was the guest of the evening; and, still rigidly conforming to the line of duty (which obtains in court ball-rooms as on battlefields), the second, third and fourth dances were for the Emperor penances instead of pleasures. But for the fifth—a waltz—he bowed before Virginia.

During this long hour there had been hardly a movement, smile or glance of hers which he had not contrived to see, since his entrance. He knew just how well Baron von Lyndal carried out his instructions concerning Miss Mowbray. He saw each partner presented to her for a dance the Emperor might not claim; and to save his life, or a national crisis, he could not have forced the same expression in speaking with her Royal Highness from Russia, as that which spontaneously brightened his face when at last he approached Virginia.

“Who is that girl?” asked Count von Breitstein, in his usual abrupt manner, as the arm of Leopold girdled the slim waist of the Princess, and the eyes of Leopold drank light from another pair of eyes lifted to his in laughter.

It was to Baroness von Lyndal that the old Chancellor put his question, and she fluttered a tiny, diamond-spangled fan of lace to hide lips that would smile, as she answered, “What, Chancellor, are you jesting, or don’t you really know who that girl is?”

Count von Breitstein turned eyes cold and gray as glass away from the two figures moving rhythmically with the music, to the face of the once celebrated beauty. Long ago he had admired Baroness von Lyndal as passionately as it was in him to admire any woman; but that day was so far distant as to be remembered with scorn, and now, such power as she had over him was merely to excite a feeling of irritation.

“I seldom trouble myself to jest,” he answered.

“Ah, one knows that truly great men are born without a sense of humor; those who have it are never as successful in life as those without,” smiled the Baroness, who was by birth a Hungarian, and loved laughter better than anything else, except compliments upon her vanishing beauty. “How stupid of me to have tried your patience. ‘That girl,’ as you so uncompromisingly call her, has two claims to attention at court. She is the English Miss Helen Mowbray whose mother has come to Kronburg armed with sheaves of introductions to us all. She is also the young woman of whom the papers are full to-day, for it is she who saved the Emperor’s life.”

“Indeed,” said the Chancellor, a gray gleam in his eye as he watched the white figure floating on the tide of music, in the arms of Leopold. “Indeed.”

“I thought you would have known, for you know most things before other people hear of them,” went on the Baroness. “Lady Mowbray and her daughter are stopping at the Hohenlangenwald Hotel. That’s the mother sitting on the left of Princess Neufried,—the pretty, Dresden china person. But the girl is a great beauty.”

“It’s generous of you to say so, Baroness,” replied the Chancellor. “I didn’t see the young lady’s face at all clearly yesterday; I was stationed too far away; and dress makes a great difference. As for what she did,” went on the old man, whose coldness to women and merciless justice to both sexes alike had earned him the nickname of “Iron Heart,” “as for what she did, if it had not been she who intervened between the Emperor and death, it would have been the fate of another to do so. It was a fortunate thing for the girl, we may say, that it happened to be her arm which struck up the weapon.”

“Or she wouldn’t be here to-night, you mean,” laughed the Baroness. “Don’t you think, then, that his Majesty is right to single her out for so much honor?” Her eyes were on the dancers; yet that mysterious skill which most women of the world have learned, taught her how not to miss the slightest change of

expression, if there were any, on the Chancellor's square, lined face.

"His Majesty is always right," he replied diplomatically. "An invitation to a ball; a dance or two; a few compliments; a call to pay his respects; a gentleman could not be less gracious. And his Majesty is one of the first gentlemen in Europe."

"He has had good training, what to do and what not to do." The Baroness flung her little sop of flattery to Cerberus with a dainty ghost of a bow for the man who had been as a second father to Leopold since the late Emperor's death. "But —we're old friends, Chancellor," (she was not to blame that they had not been more in the days before she became Baroness von Lyndal), "so tell me; can you look at the girl's face and the Emperor's, and still say that everything will end with an invitation, a dance, some compliments, and a call to pay respects?"

Iron Heart frowned and sneered, wondering what he could have seen, twenty-two years ago, to admire in this flighty woman. He would have escaped from her now, if escape had been feasible; but he could not be openly rude to the wife of the Grand Master of Ceremonies, at the Emperor's ball. And besides, he was not unwilling, perhaps, to show the lady that her sentimental and unsuitable innuendos were as the buzzing of a fly about his ears.

"I'm close upon seventy, and no longer a fair judge of a woman's attractions," he returned carelessly. "A look at her face conveys nothing to me. But, were she Helen of Troy instead of Helen Mowbray, the invitation, the dance, the compliments, and the call—with the present of some jeweled souvenir—are all that are permissible in the circumstances."

"What circumstances?" and the Baroness looked as innocent as an inquiring child.

"The lady is not of Royal blood. And his Majesty, I thank Heaven, is not a roué."

"He has a heart, though you trained him, Chancellor; and he has eyes. He may never have used them to much purpose before, yet there must be a first time. And the higher and more strongly built the tower, once it begins to topple, the greater is the fall thereof."

"Is it the sense of humor, which you say I lack, that gives you pleasure in discussing the wildest improbabilities, as if they were events to be considered seriously? If it is, I'm not sorry to lack it. In any case, it's as well that neither you nor I is the Emperor's keeper."

“We’re at least his very good friends, I as well as you, in my humbler way, Chancellor. And you and I have known each other for twenty-two years. If it amuses me to discuss improbabilities, why not? Since you call them improbabilities, it can do no harm to dwell upon them as ingredients for romance. Not for worlds would I suggest that his Majesty isn’t an example for all men to follow, nor that poor, pretty Miss Mowbray could be tempted to indiscretion. But yet I’d be ready to make a wager—the Emperor being human, and the girl a beauty—that an acquaintance so romantically begun won’t end with a ball and a call.”

“What could there possibly be more—or what you hint at as more—in honor?”

The Chancellor’s voice was angry at last, as well as stern, for he could not bear persistence—in other people—unless it were to further some cause of his own. To the delight of the woman who had once tried in vain to melt his iron heart, Count von Breitstein began to look somewhat like a baited bull. Really, said the Baroness to herself, there was an actual resemblance in feature; and joyously she searched for a few more little ribbon-tipped banderillos.

What fun it was to ruffle the temper of the surly old brute who had humiliated her woman’s vanity in days long past, but not forgotten! She knew the Chancellor’s desire for the Emperor’s marriage as soon as a suitable match could be found; and though she was not in the secret of his plans, would have felt little surprise at learning that some eligible Royal girl had already been selected. Now, how amusing it would be actually to make the old man tremble for the success of his hopes, even if it should turn out in the end to be impossible or undesirable to upset them!

“What could there be more—in honor?” she echoed lightly after an instant given to reflection.

“Why, the Emperor and the girl will see a great deal of each other, unless you banish or imprison the Mowbrays. There’ll be many dances together, many calls; in fact, a serial romance instead of a short story. Why shouldn’t his Majesty know the pleasure of a—platonic friendship with a beautiful and charming young woman?”

“Because Plato’s out of fashion, if ever he was in, among human beings with red blood in their veins; and because, as I said, the Emperor is above all else a man of honor. Besides, I doubt that any woman, no matter how pretty or young, could wield a really powerful influence over his life.”

“You doubt that? Then you don’t know the Emperor; and you’ve forgotten some of the traditions of his house.”

“Are you trying to warn me of disaster, Baroness?”

She laughed. “Oh, dear no. Of nothing disagreeable. But I should be sorry to think, as you seem to do, that our Emperor has no youth in his veins.”

“I think nothing of the sort. What I do think is that my teachings have not been in vain, and that he has grown up to put his duty to his country and his own self-respect above everything. He’s a strong man—too strong to be trapped in the meshes of any pink and white Vivien. And if he admired a young woman not of Royal blood, he would keep his distance for her sake. You say this English miss is with her mother at the principal hotel of Kronburg. If Leopold constantly visited them there we should have a scandal. On the other hand, to suggest meeting the girl outside, or incognito, would be an insult. Either way he would be but poorly rewarding a woman who saved his life.”

Baroness von Lyndal’s color rallied to the support of her rouge, and her smile dwindled to inanity, for she had insisted upon the argument, and it was going against her.

In her haste to vex the Chancellor, she had not stopped to study from every side the question she had raised. So far, she had merely succeeded in irritating him, and she owed him much more than a pin prick. Such infinitesimal wounds she had contrived to give the man in abundance, during her twenty-two years at the Rhaetian Court; but now, if she hurt him at all, she would like the stab to be deep and memorable.

To be sure, in beginning the conversation, she had thought of nothing more than a momentary gratification, but the very heat of the argument into which she had thrown herself had warmed her malice, and sharpened the weapon of her wit. She could justify her expressed opinion only by events, and it occurred to her that she might be able to shape events in such a way that she could say with eyes, if not in words, “I told you so.”

Her fading smile brightened. “Dear Chancellor, you do well to have faith in your Imperial pupil,” said she. “You’ve helped to make him what he is, and you’re ready to keep him what he should be. I suppose, even, that if, being but a young man and having the hot blood of his race, he should stray into a primrose path, you would take advantage of old friendship to—er—put up sign-posts and

barriers?”

“Were there the slightest chance of such necessity arising,” grumbled the Chancellor, shrugging his shoulders.

“It’s like your integrity and courage. What a comfort, then, that the necessity is so unlikely to arise.”

The old man looked at her with level gaze, the ruthless look that brushes away a woman’s paint and powder, and coldly counts the wrinkles underneath. “I must have misunderstood you then, a moment ago,” he said. “I thought your argument was all the other way round, madam?”

“I told you I was amusing myself. What can one do at a ball, when one has reached the age when it would be foolish to dance? Why, I believe that Lady Mowbray and her daughter are not remaining long in Kronburg.”

At last she was able to judge that she had given the Chancellor a few uneasy moments, for his eyes brightened visibly with relief. “Ah,” he returned, “then they are going out of Rhaetia?”

“Not exactly that,” said the Baroness, slowly, pleasantly, and distinctly. “I hear that they’ve been asked to the country to visit one of his Majesty’s oldest friends.”

Leopold was not supposed to care for dancing, though he danced—as it was his pride to do all things—well. Certainly there was often a perfunctoriness about his manner in a ball-room, a suggestion of the soldier on duty in his unsmiling face, and his readiness to lead a partner to her seat when a dance was over.

But to-night a new Leopold moved to the music. A girl’s white arm on his—that slender arm which had been quick and firm as a man’s in his defense; the perfume of a girl’s hair, and the gold glints upon it; the shadow of a girl’s dark lashes, and the light in a pair of gray eyes when they were lifted; the beating of a girl’s heart near him; the springtime grace of a girl’s sweet youth in its contrast with the voluptuous summer of Rhaetian types of beauty; the warm rose that spread upwards from a girl’s childlike dimples to the womanly arch of her brows; all these charms and more which rendered one girl a hundred times

adorable, took hold of him, and made him not an Emperor, but a man, unarmored.

When the music ceased, he fancied for an instant that some accident had befallen the musicians. Then, when he realized that the end of the dance had come in its due time, he remembered with pleasure a rule of his court, established in the days of those who had been before him. After each dance an interval of ten minutes was allowed before the beginning of another. Ten minutes are not much to a man who has things to say which could hardly be said in ten hours; still, they are something; and to waste even one would be like spilling a drop of precious elixir from a tiny bottle containing but nine other drops.

They had scarcely spoken yet, except for commonplaces which any one might have overheard, since the day on the mountain; and in this first moment of the ten, each was wondering whether or no that day should be ignored between them. Leopold did not feel that it should be spoken of, for it was possible that the girl did not recognize the chamois hunter in the Emperor; and Virginia did not feel that she could speak of it. But then, few things turn out as people feel they should.

Next to the throne room was the ball-room; and beyond was another known as the “Waldsaal,” which Leopold had fitted up for the gratification of a fancy. It was named the “Waldsaal” because it represented a wood. Walls and ceiling were masked with thick-growing creepers trained over invisible wires, through which peeped stars of electric light, like the chequerings of sunshine between netted branches. Trees grew up, with their roots in boxes hidden beneath the moss-covered floor. There were grottoes of ivy-draped rock in the corners, and here and there out from leafy shadows glittered the glass eyes of birds and animals—eagles, stags, chamois, wolves and bears—which the Emperor had shot.

This strange room, so vast as to seem empty when dozens of people wandered beneath its trees and among its rock grottoes, was thrown open to guests whenever a ball was given at the palace; but the conservatories and palm houses were more popular; and when Leopold brought Miss Mowbray to the Waldsaal after their dance, it was in the hope that they might not be disturbed.

She was lovelier than ever in her white dress, under the trees, looking up at him with a wonderful look in her eyes, and the young man’s calmness was mastered by the beating of his blood.

“This is a kind of madness,” he said to himself. “It will pass. It must pass.” And aloud,—meaning all the while to say something different and commonplace,—the real words in his mind broke through the crust of conventionality. “Why did you do it?”

Virginia’s eyes widened. “I don’t understand.” Then, in an instant, she found that she did understand. She knew, too, that the question had asked itself in spite of him, but that once it had been uttered he would stand to his guns.

“I mean the thing I shall have to thank you for always.”

If Virginia had had time to think, she might have prepared some pretty answer; but, there being no time, her response came as his question had, from the heart. “I couldn’t help doing it.”

“You couldn’t help risking your life to—” He dared not finish.

“It was to save—” Nor was there any end for her sentence.

Then perhaps it was not strange that he forgot certain restrictions which a Royal man, in conversing with a commoner, is not supposed to forget. In fact, he forgot that he was Royal, or that she was not, and his voice grew unsteady, his tone eager, as if he had been some poor subaltern with the girl of his first love.

“There’s something I must show you,” he said. Opening a button of the military coat blazing with jewels and orders, he drew out a loop of thin gold chain. At the end dangled a small, bright thing that flashed under a star of electric light.

“My ring!” breathed Virginia.

Thus died the Emperor’s intention to ignore the day that had been theirs together.

“Your ring! You gave it to Leo. He kept it. He will always keep it. Have I surprised you?”

Virginia felt it would be best to say “yes,” but instead she answered “no”; for pretty, white fibs cannot be told under such a look in a man’s eyes, by a girl who loves him.

“I have not? When did you guess the truth? Yesterday, or—”

“At Alleheiligen.”

Silence fell for a minute, while Leopold digested the answer, and its full

meaning. He remembered the bread and ham; the cow he could not milk; the rücksacks he had carried. He remembered everything—and laughed.

“You knew, at Alleheiligen? Not on the mountain, when—”

“Yes. I guessed even then, I confess. Oh, I don’t mean that I went there expecting to find you. I didn’t. I think I shouldn’t have gone, had I known. Every one believed you were at Melinabad. But when I tumbled down and you saved me, I looked up, and—of course I’d seen your picture, and one reads in the papers that you’re fond of chamois hunting. I couldn’t help guessing—oh, I’m sorry you asked me this!”

“Why?”

“Because—one might have to be afraid of an Emperor if he were angry.”

“Do I look angry?”

Their eyes met again, laughing at first, then each finding unexpected depths in those of the other which drove away laughter. Something in Leopold’s breast seemed alive and struggling to be free from restraint, like a fierce, wild bird. He shut his lips tightly, breathing hard. Both forgot that a question had been asked; but it was Virginia who spoke first, since it is easier for a woman than a man to hide feeling.

“I wonder why you kept the ring after my—impertinence.”

“I had a good reason for keeping it.”

“Won’t you tell me?”

“You’re quick at forming conclusions, Miss Mowbray. Can’t you guess?”

“To remind you to beware of strange young women on mountains.”

“No.”

“Because your own picture is inside?”

“It was a better reason than that.”

“Am I not to ask it?”

“On that day, you asked what you chose. All the more should you do so now,

since there’s nothing I could refuse you.”

“Not the half of your Kingdom—like the Royal men in fairy stories?”

As soon as the words were out Virginia would have given much to have them back. She had not thought of a meaning they might convey; but she tried not to blush, lest he should think of it now. Nevertheless he did think of it, and the light words, striking a chord they had not aimed to touch, went echoing on and on, till they reached that part of himself which the Emperor knew least about—his heart.

“Half his Kingdom?” Yes, he would give it to this girl, if he could. Heavens, what it would be to share it with her!

“Ask anything you will,” he said, as a man speaks in a dream.

“Then tell me—why you kept the ring.”

“Because the only woman I ever cared—to make my friend, took it from her finger and gave it to me.”

“Now the Emperor is pleased to pay compliments.”

“You know I am sincere.”

“But you’d seen me only for an hour. Instead of deserving your friendship, I’m afraid I—”

“For one hour? That’s true. And how long ago is that one hour? A week or so, I suppose, as Time counts. But then came yesterday, and the thing you did for me. Now, I’ve known you always.”

“If you had, perhaps you wouldn’t want me for your friend.”

“I do want you.”

The words would come. It was true—already. He did want her. But not as a friend. His world,—a world without women, without passion fiery enough to devour principles or traditions, was upside down.

It was well that the ten minutes’ grace between dances was over, and the music for the next about to begin. A young officer, Count von Breitstein’s half-brother —who was to be Miss Mowbray’s partner—appeared in the distance, looking for her; but stopped, seeing that she was still with the Emperor.

“Good-by,” said Virginia, while her words could still be only for the ears of Leopold.

“Not good-by. We’re friends.”

“Yes. But we sha’n’t meet often.”

“Why? Are you leaving Kronburg?”

“Perhaps—soon. I don’t know.”

“I must see you again. I will see you once more, whatever comes.”

“Once more, perhaps. I hope so, but—”

“After that—”

“Who knows?”

“Once more—once more!” The words echoed in Virginia’s ears. She heard them through everything, as one hears the undertone of a mountain torrent, though a brass band may bray to drown its deep music.

Once more he would see her, whatever might come. She could guess why it might be only once, though he would fain have that once again and again repeated. For this game of hers, begun with such a light heart, was more difficult to play than she had dreamed.

If she could but be sure he cared; if he would tell her so, in words, and not with eyes alone, the rest might be easy, although at best she could not see the end. Yet how, in honor, could he tell Miss Helen Mowbray that he cared? And if the telling were not to be in honor, how could she bear to live her life?

“Once more!” What would happen in that “once more?” Perhaps nothing save a repetition of grateful thanks, and courteous words akin to a farewell.

To be sure Lady Mowbray and her daughter might run away, and the negotiations between the Emperor’s advisers and the Grand Duchess of Baumenburg-Drippe for the Princess Virginia’s hand might be allowed to go on, as if no outside influence had ruffled the peaceful current of events. Then, in the

end, a surprise would come for Leopold; wilful Virginia would have played her little comedy, and all might be said to end well. But Virginia's heart refused to be satisfied with so tame a last chapter, a finish to her romance so conventional as to be distastefully obvious, almost if not quite a failure.

She had begun to drink a sweet and stimulating draught—she who had been brought up on milk and water—and she was reluctant to put down the cup, still half full of sparkling nectar.

"Once more!" If only that once could be magnified into many times. If she could have her chance—her "fling," like the lucky girls who were not Royal!

So she was thinking in the carriage by her mother's side, and the Grand Duchess had to speak twice, before her daughter knew their silence had been broken.

"I forgot to tell you something, Virginia."

"Ye-es, Mother?"

"Your great success has made me absent-minded, child. You looked like a shining white lily among all those handsome, overblown Rhaetian women."

"Thank you, dear. Was that what you forgot to say?"

"Oh no! It was this. The Baroness von Lyndal has been most kind. She urges us to give up our rooms at the hotel, on the first of next week, and join her house party at Schloss Lyndalberg. It's only a few miles out of town. What do you think of the plan?"

"Leave—Kronburg?"

"She's asked a number of friends—to meet the Emperor."

"Oh! He didn't speak of it—when we danced."

"But she has mentioned it to him since, no doubt,—before giving me the invitation. Intimate friend of his as she is, she wouldn't dare ask people to meet him, if he hadn't first sanctioned the suggestion. Still, she can afford to be more or less informal. The Baroness was dancing with the Emperor, I remember now, just before she came to me. They were talking together quite earnestly. I can recall the expression of his face."

"Was it pleased, or—"

“I was wondering what she could have said to make him look so happy. Perhaps __”

“What answer did you give Baroness von Lyndal?”

“I told her—I thought you wouldn’t mind—I told her we would go.”

CHAPTER IX

IRON HEART AT HOME

Schloss Lyndalberg towers high on a promontory, overlooking a lake, seven or eight miles to the south of the Rhaetian capital. The castle is comparatively modern, with pointed turrets and fretted minarets, and, being built of white, Carrara marble, throws a reflection snowy as a submerged swan, into the clear green water of the Mömmelsee. All the surroundings of the palace, from its broad terraces to its jeweled fountains and well-nigh tropical gardens, suggest luxury, gaiety, pleasure.

But, on the opposite bank of the Mömmelsee is huddled the dark shape of an ancient fortified stronghold, begun no one remembers how many centuries ago by the first Count von Breitstein. Generation following generation, the men of that family completed the work, until nowadays it is difficult to know where the rock ends, and the castle begins. There, like a dragon squatting on the coils of its own tail, the dark mass is poised, its deep-set window-eyes glaring across the bright water at the white splendor of Lyndalberg, like the malevolent stare of the monster waiting to spring upon and devour a fair young maiden.

The moods of Baroness von Lyndal concerning grim old Schloss Breitstein had varied many times during her years of residence by the lake. Sometimes she pleased herself by reflecting that the great man who had slighted her lived in less luxury than she had attained by her excellent marriage. Again, the thought of the ancient lineage of the present Count von Breitstein filled her with envy; and oftener than all, the feeling that the “old grizzly bear” could crouch in his den and watch sneeringly everything which happened at Lyndalberg got upon the lady’s nerves. She could have screamed and shaken her fist at the dark mass of rock and stone across the water. But after the birthday ball and during the first days of Leopold’s visit at her house, she often threw a whimsical glance at the grim silhouette against the northern sky, and smiled.

“Can you see, old bear?” she would ask, gayly. “Are you spying over there? Do you think yourself all-wise and all-powerful? Do you see what’s in my mind now, and do you guess partly why I’ve taken all this trouble? Are you racking your brain for some way of spoiling my little plans? But you can’t do it, you know. It’s too late. There’s nothing you can do, except sit still and growl, and glare at your own claws—which a woman has clipped. How do you like the

outlook, old bear? Do you lie awake at night and study how to save your scheme for the Emperor's marriage? All your grumpy old life you've despised women; but now you're beginning at last to find out that powerful as you are, there are some things a woman with tact and money, nice houses and a good-natured husband can do, which the highest statesman in the land can't undo. How soon shall I make you admit that, Chancellor Bear?"

Thus the Baroness, standing at her drawing-room window, would amuse herself in odd moments, when she was not arranging original and elaborate entertainments for her guests. And she congratulated herself particularly on having had the forethought to invite Egon von Breitstein, the Chancellor's half-brother.

There was a barrier of thirty-six years' difference in age between the two, and they had never been friends in the true sense of the word, for the old man was temperamentally unable to sympathize with the tastes, or understand the temptations of the younger brother, and the younger man was mentally unable to appreciate the qualities of the elder.

Nevertheless it was rumored at court that Iron Heart had more than once used the gay and good-looking Captain of Cavalry for a catspaw in pulling some very big and hot chestnuts out of the fire. At all events "Handsome Egon," so known among his followers, "the Chancellor's Jackal" (thus nicknamed by his enemies) would have found difficulty in keeping up appearances without the allowance granted by his powerful half-brother. The ill-assorted pair were often in communication, and the Baroness liked to think that news fresh from Lyndalberg must sooner or later be wafted like a wind-blown scent of roses across the water to Schloss Breitstein.

She was still less displeased than surprised, therefore, when—the Emperor having been three days at Lyndalberg, with two more days of his visit to run—an urgent message arrived for Captain von Breitstein from his brother.

Poor old Lorenz was wrestling with his enemy gout, it appeared, and wished for Egon's immediate presence.

Such a summons could not be neglected. Egon's whole future depended upon his half-brother's caprice, he hinted to the Baroness in asking leave to desert her pleasant party for a few hours. So of course she sent the Chancellor her regrets, with the Baron's; and Egon went off charged with a friendly message from the Emperor as well.

When the Captain of Cavalry had set out from Lyndalberg to Schloss Breitstein by the shortest way—across the lake in a smart little motor-boat—promising to be back in time for dinner and a concert, the Baroness spent all her energy in getting up an impromptu riding-party, which would give Leopold the chance of another tête-a-tête with Miss Mowbray.

Already many such chances had been arranged, so cleverly as not to excite gossip; and if the flirtation (destined by the hostess to disgust Leopold with his Chancellor's matrimonial projects) did not advance by leaps and bounds, it was certainly not the fault of Baroness von Lyndal.

"Egon has been told to use his eyes and ears for all they're worth at Lyndalberg, and now he's called upon to hand in his first report," she said to herself, when the younger von Breitstein was off on his mission across the lake.

But for once, at least, the "Chancellor's Jackal" was wronged by unjust suspicion. He arrived at Schloss Breitstein ignorant of his brother's motive in sending for him, though he shrewdly suspected it to be something quite different from the one alleged.

The Chancellor was in his study, a deep windowed, tower room, with walls book-lined nearly to the cross-beamed ceiling. He sat reading a budget of letters when Egon was announced, and if he were really ill, he did not betray his suffering. The square face, with its beetling brows, eyes of somber fire, and forehead impressive as a cathedral dome, showed no new lines graven by pain.

"Sit down, Egon," he said, abruptly, tearing in half an envelope stamped with the head of Hungaria's King. "I'll be ready for you in a moment."

The young man took the least uncomfortable chair in the room, which from his point of view was to say little in its favor; because the newest piece of furniture there, has been made a hundred years before the world understood that lounging was not a crime. Over the high, stone mantel hung a shield, so brightly polished as to fulfil the office of a mirror, and from where Egon sat, perforce upright and rigid, he could see himself vignetted in reflection.

He admired his fresh color, which was like a girl's, pointed the waxed ends of his mustache with nervous, cigarette-stained fingers, and thinking of many agreeable things, from baccarat to roulette, from roulette to races, and races to pretty women, he wondered which he had to thank for this summons to the Chancellor. Unfortunately, brother Lorenz knew everything; one's pleasant

peccadilloes buzzed to his ears like flies; there was little hope of deceiving him.

Egon sighed, and his eyes turned mechanically from his own visage on shining steel, to the letter held in an old hand so veined that it reminded the young man of a rock netted with the sprawling roots of ancient trees. He had just time to recognize the writing as that of Adalbert, Crown Prince of Hungaria, whom he knew slightly, when keen eyes curtained with furled and wrinkled lids, glanced up from the letter.

“It’s coming,” thought Egon. “What can the old chap have found out?”

But to his surprise the Chancellor’s first words had no connection with him or his misdeeds.

“So our Emperor is amusing himself at Lyndalberg?”

Egon’s face brightened. He could be cunning in emergencies, but he was not clever, and always he felt himself at a disadvantage with the old statesman. Unless he had a special favor to ask, he generally preferred discussing the affairs of others with the Chancellor, rather than allowing attention to be attracted to his own. “Oh yes,” he answered, brightly. “His Majesty is amusing himself uncommonly well. I never saw him in as brilliant spirits. But you, dear Lorenz. Tell me about yourself. Is your gout—”

“The devil take my gout!”

Egon started. “A good thing if he did, provided he left you behind,” he retorted, meaning exactly the opposite, as he often did when trying to measure wits with the Chancellor. “But you sent for me—”

“Don’t tell me you supposed I sent for you because I wanted consolation or condolence?”

“No-o,” laughed Egon, uneasily. “I fancied there was some other more pressing reason. But I’m bound in common courtesy to take your sincerity for granted until you undeceive me.”

“Hang common courtesy between you and me,” returned the Bear. “I’ve nothing to conceal. I sent for you to tell me what mischief that witch-cat Mechtilde von Lyndal is plotting. You’re on the spot. Trust you for seeing everything that goes on—the one thing I would trust you to do.”

“Thanks,” said Egon.

“Don’t thank me yet, however grateful you may be. But I don’t mind hinting that it won’t be the worse for you, if for once you’ve used those fine eyes of yours to some useful purpose.”

Egon was genuinely astonished at this turn of the conversation, as he had been carefully arming himself against a personal attack from any one of several directions. He sat pointing the sharp ends of his mustache, one after the other, and trying to remember some striking incident with which to adorn a more or less accurate narrative.

“What would you call useful?” he inquired at last.

The Chancellor answered, but indirectly. “Has the Emperor been playing the fool at Lyndalberg, these last few days?”

“Do you want to make me guilty of *lèse Majesté*?” Egon raised his eyebrows; but he was recovering presence of mind. “If by playing the fool, though, you mean falling in love, why then, brother, I should say he had done little else during the three days; and perhaps even the first of those was not the beginning.”

The Chancellor growled out a word which he would hardly have uttered in the Imperial presence, particularly in the connection he suggested. “Let me hear exactly what has been going on from day’s end to day’s end,” he commanded.

Egon grew thoughtful once more. Clearly, here was the explanation of the summons. He was to be let off easily, it appeared; but, suspense relieved, he was not ready to be satisfied with negative blessings.

“Are you sure it isn’t a bit like telling tales out of school?” he objected.

“School-boys—with empty pockets—have been known to do that,” said the Chancellor. “But perhaps your pockets aren’t empty—eh?”

“They’re in a chronic state of emptiness,” groaned Egon.

“On the fifteenth day of October your quarterly allowance will be paid,” remarked his brother. “I would increase the instalment by the amount of five thousand gulden, if that would make it worth your while to talk—and forget nothing but your scruples.”

“Oh, you know I’m always delighted to please you!” exclaimed Egon. “It’s only

natural, living the monotonous life you do when you're not busy with the affairs of state, that you should like to hear what goes on in the world outside. Of course, I'll gladly do my best as a *raconteur*."

"My dear young man, don't lie," said the Chancellor. "The habit is growing on you. You lie even to yourself. By and by you'll believe yourself, and then all hope for your soul will be over. What I want to know is; how far the Emperor has gone in his infatuation for this English girl. I'm not afraid to speak plainly to you, so you may safely—and profitably—do the same with me. In the first place I'll put you at your ease by making a humiliating confession. The other night the woman von Lyndal tried to 'draw me,' as she would express it, on this subject, and I'm bitterly mortified to say she partly succeeded. She suggested an entanglement between Leopold and the girl. I replied that Leopold wasn't the man to pull down a hornet's nest of gossip around the ears of a young woman who had saved his life. No matter what his inclinations might be, I insisted that he would pay her no repeated visits. This thrust the fair Mechtilde parried—as if repeating a mere rumor—by saying that she believed the girl was to stay at the country house of some old friend of the Emperor. At the time, I attached little importance to her chatter, believing that she merely wished to give me a spiteful slap or two, as is her habit when she has the chance. For once, though, she has succeeded in stealing a march upon me; and she kept the secret of her plan until too late for me to have any hope of preventing Leopold from fulfilling his engagement at her house. After that was safely arranged, I don't doubt she was overjoyed that I should guess her plot."

"Do you think that, even if you'd known sooner, you could have stopped the Emperor from visiting at Lyndalberg?" asked Egon. "I know that you are iron; but he is steel."

"I would have stopped him," returned the Chancellor. "I should have made no bones about the reason; for I've found that the best way with Leopold is to blurt out the whole truth, and fight him—my experience against his will. If advice and warning hadn't sufficed to restrain him from insulting the girl who is to be his wife, and injuring the reputation of the girl who never can be, I would have devised some expedient to thwart him, for his own good. I'm not a man to give up when I feel that I am right."

"Neither is he," Egon added. "But since you seem so determined to nip this dainty blossom of love in the bud, we'll hope it's not yet too late for a sharp frost to blight it."

“I sent for you,” said the Chancellor, brushing away metaphor with an impatient gesture, “to show me the precise spot on which to lay my finger.”

“I’ll do my best to deserve your confidence,” responded Egon, gracefully. “Let me see, where shall I begin? Well, as you know, it’s simpler for the Emperor to see a good deal of the woman he admires, at a friend’s house than almost anywhere else, in his own country. This particular woman risked her life to save his; and it’s so natural for him to be gracious in return, that people would be surprised if he were not. There’s so much in their favor, at the commencement.

“Miss Mowbray and her mother arrived at Lyndalberg before the Emperor, had made friends there, and were ready for the campaign. The girl is undoubtedly beautiful—the prettiest creature I think I ever saw—and she has a winning way which takes with women as well as men. Not one of her fellow-guests seems to put a wrong construction on her flirtation with the Emperor, or his with her. The other men would think him blind if he didn’t admire her as much as they do; and none of the women there are of the sort to be jealous. So, are you sure, Lorenz, that you’re not taking too serious a view of the affair?”

“It can’t be taken too seriously, considering the circumstances. I’ve told you my plans for the Emperor’s future. Princesses are women, and gossip is hydra-headed. When the lady hears—she who has been allowed to understand that the Emperor of Rhaetia only waits for a suitable opportunity of formally asking for her hand—for she will surely hear, that he has seized this very moment for his first *liason*, I tell you neither she nor her people are likely to accept the statement meekly. She’s half German; on her father’s side a cousin not too distant of William II. She’s half English; on her mother’s side related to the King through the line of the Stuarts. And in her there’s a dash of American blood which comes from a famous grandmother, who was descended from George Washington, a man as proud, and with the right to be as proud, as any King. All three countries would have reason to resent such an ungallant slight from Rhaetia.”

“The little affair must be hushed up,” said Egon.

“It must be stopped, and at once,” said the Chancellor.

“Ach!” sighed the young man, with as much meaning in the long drawn breath, as the elder might care to read. And if it did not discourage, it at least irritated him. “Go on!” he exclaimed sharply. “Go on with your sorry tale.”

“After all, when one comes to the telling, there isn’t a very great deal one can

put into cut-and-dried words," explained Egon. "At table, the Emperor has his hostess on one side and his fair preserver on the other. The two talk as much together during meals as etiquette allows, and perhaps a little more. Then, as the Emperor has been often at Lyndalberg, he can act as cicerone for a stranger. He has shown Miss Mowbray all the beauties of the place. He gathers her roses in the rose garden; he has guided her through the grottoes. He has piloted her through the labyrinth; he has told her which are the best dogs in the kennels; and has given her the history of all the horses in the Baron's stables. I know this from the table talk. He has explored the lake with Miss Mowbray and her mother in a motor-boat; perhaps you saw the party? And whether or no he brought his automobile to Lyndalberg on purpose, in any case he's had the Mowbrays out in it several times already. One would hardly think he could have found a chance to do so much in such a short time; but our Emperor is a man of action. Yesterday we had a picnic at the Seebachfall, to see Thorwaldsen's Undine. Leopold and Miss Mowbray being splendid climbers, reached the statue on the height over the fall long before the rest of us. At starting, however, I was close behind with the Baroness, and overheard some joke between the two, about a mountain and a cow. The Emperor spoke of milking as a fine art, and said he'd lately been taking lessons. They laughed a great deal at this, and it was plain that they were on terms of comradeship. When a young man and a girl have a secret understanding —even the most innocent one—it puts them apart from others.

"Last night there were fireworks on the lake. The Emperor and Miss Mowbray watched them together, for everything was conducted most informally. Afterwards we had an impromptu cotillion, with three or four pretty new figures invented by the Baroness. The Emperor gave Miss Mowbray several favors, and one was a buckle of enameled forget-me-nots. This morning there was tennis. The Emperor and Miss Mowbray played together. They were both so skilful, it was a pleasure to watch them. At luncheon they each ate a double almond out of one shell, had a game over it, and Leopold caught Miss Mowbray napping. That brings us to the moment of my coming to you. For the afternoon, I fancy the Baroness was getting up a riding party; and this evening unless they're too tired, she'll perhaps get up an amateur concert at which Miss Mowbray will sing. The girl has a delicious voice."

"The creature must be a fool, or an adventuress," pronounced the Chancellor. "If she has kept her senses she ought to know that nothing can come of this folly—except sorrow or scandal."

Egon shrugged his stiffly padded, military shoulders. "I have always found that a

woman in love doesn’t stop to count the cost.”

“So! You fancy her ‘in love’ with the Emperor.”

“With the man, rather than the Emperor, if I’m a judge of character.”

“Which you’re not!” Iron Heart brusquely disposed of that suggestion. “The merest school-girl could pull wool over your eyes, if she cared to take the trouble.”

“This one doesn’t care a rap. She hardly knows that I exist.”

“Humph!” The Chancellor’s eyes appraised his young brother’s features. “That’s a pity. You might have tried cutting the Emperor out. Her affair with him can have no happy ending; while you, in spite of all your faults, with your good looks, our position, and my money, wouldn’t be a bad match for an ambitious girl.”

“Your money?”

“I mean, should I choose to make you my heir, and I would choose, if you married to please me. Who are these Mowbrays?”

“I haven’t had the curiosity to inquire into their antecedents,” said Egon. “I only know that they’re ladies, that they must be of some consequence in their own country, or they couldn’t have got the letters of introduction they have; and that the girl is the prettiest on earth.”

“Mechtilde talked to me, I remember, a good deal about those letters of introduction,” the Chancellor reflected aloud. “But Rhaetia is a long cry from England; and letters might be forged. I’ve known such things to be done. Fetch me a big red volume you’ll find on the third shelf from the floor, at the left of the south window. You can’t miss it. It’s ‘Burke’s Peerage.’”

Egon rose with alacrity to obey. He was rather thoughtful, for his brother had put an entirely new and exciting idea into his head.

Presently the red volume was discovered and laid on the desk before the Chancellor, who turned the leaves over until he found the page desired. As his eye fell upon the long line of Mowbrays, his face changed and the bristling brows came together in a grizzled line. Apparently the women were not adventuresses, at least in the ordinary acceptation of the term.

There they were; his square-tipped finger pressed down upon the printed names with a dig that might have signified his disposition toward their representatives.

“The girl’s mother is the widow of Reginald, sixth Baron Mowbray,” the old

man muttered half aloud. “Son, Reginald Edward, fifteen years of age. Daughter, Helen Augusta, twenty-eight. Aha! She’s no chicken, this young lady. She ought to be a woman of the world.”

“Twenty-eight!” replied Egon. “I’ll eat my hat if she’s twenty-eight.”

“Doesn’t she look it, by daylight?”

“Not an hour over nineteen. Might be younger. Jove, I was never so surprised to learn a woman’s age! By the by, I heard her telling Baron von Lyndal last night, apropos of our great Rhaetian victory, that she was eleven years old on the day it took place. That would make her about twenty now. When she spoke, I remember she gave a look at her mother, across the room, as though she were frightened. I suppose she was hoping there was no copy of this big red book at Lyndalberg.”

“That thought might have been in her mind,” assented the Chancellor, “or else she—” He left his sentence unfinished, and sat with unseeing eyes fixed in an owlish stare on the open page of Burke.

“I should like to know if you really meant what you said about my marriage a little while ago.” Egon ventured to attract his brother’s attention. “Because if you did—”

“If I did—”

“I might try very hard to please you in my choice of a wife.”

“Be a little more implicit. You mean, you would try to prove to Miss Mowbray that a Captain of Cavalry in the hand is worth an Emperor in the bush—a bramble-brush at that, eh?”

“Yes. I would do my best. And as you say, I’m not without advantages.”

“You are not. I was on the point of suggesting that you made the most of them in Miss Mowbray’s eyes—*until you brought me this red book*.”

The large forefinger tapped the page of Mowbrays, while two lines which might have meant amusement, or a sneer, scored themselves on either side the Chancellor’s mouth.

“And now—you’ve changed your mind?” There was disappointment in Egon’s voice.

“I don’t say that. I say only, ‘Wait.’ Make yourself as agreeable to the lady as you like. But don’t pledge yourself, and don’t count upon my promise or my money, until you hear again. By that time—well, we shall see what we shall see. Keep your hand in. But wait—wait.”

“How long am I to wait? If the thing’s to be done at all, it must be done soon, for meanwhile, the Emperor makes all the running.”

The Chancellor looked up again from the red book, his fist still covering the Mowbrays, as if they were to be extinguished. “You are to wait,” he said, “until I’ve had answers to a couple of telegrams I shall send to-night.”

CHAPTER X

VIRGINIA’S GREAT MOMENT

The first and second dressing gongs had sounded at Schloss Lyndalberg on the evening of the day after Egon von Breitstein’s visit to his brother, and the Grand Duchess was beginning to wonder uneasily what kept her daughter, when ringed fingers tapped on the panel of the door.

“Come in!” she answered, and Virginia appeared, still in the white tennis dress she had worn that afternoon. She stood for an instant without speaking, her face so radiantly beautiful that her mother thought it seemed illumined from a light within.

It had been on the lips of the Grand Duchess to scold the girl for her tardiness, since to be late was an unpardonable offense, with an Imperial Majesty in the house. But in that radiance the words died.

“Virginia, what is it? You look—I scarcely know how you look. But you make me feel that something has happened.”

The Princess came slowly across the room, smiling softly, with an air of one who walks in sleep. Hardly conscious of what she did, she sank down in a big chair, and sat resting her elbows on her knees, her chin nestling between her two palms, like a pink-white rose in its calyx.

“You may go, Ernestine,” said the Grand Duchess to her maid. “I’ll ring when I want you again.”

The elaborate process of waving and dressing her still abundant hair had fortunately come to a successful end, and Ernestine had just caused a diamond star to rise above her forehead. She was in a robe de chambre, and the rest of her toilet could wait till curiosity was satisfied.

But Virginia still sat dreaming, her happy eyes far away. The Grand Duchess had to speak twice before the girl heard, and started a little. “My daughter—have you anything to tell me?”

The Princess roused herself. “Nothing, Mother, really. Except that I’m the happiest girl on earth.”

“Why—what has he said?”

“Not one word that any one mightn’t have listened to. But I know now. He does care. And I think he will say something before we part.”

“There’s only one more day of his visit here, after to-night.”

“One whole long, beautiful day—together.”

“But after all, dearest,” argued her mother, “what do you expect? If in truth you were only Miss Mowbray, marriage between you and the Emperor would be out of the question. You’ve never gone into the subject of your feelings about this, quite thoroughly with me, and I do wish I knew precisely what you hope for from him; what you will consider the—the keystone of the situation?”

“Only for him to say that he loves me,” Virginia confessed. “If I’m right—if I’ve brought something new into his life, something which has shown him that his heart’s as important as his head, then there will come a moment when he can keep silence no longer—when he’ll be forced to say; ‘I love you, dear, and because we can’t belong to each other, day is turned into night for me.’ Then, when that moment comes, the tide of my fortune will be at its flood. I shall tell him that I love him too. And I shall tell him *all the truth*.”

“You’ll tell him who we really are?”

“Yes. And why I’ve been masquerading. That it was because, ever since I was a little girl, he’d been the one man in the world for me; because, when our marriage was suggested through official channels, I made up my mind that I must win him first through love, or live single all my days.”

“What if he should be vexed at the deception, and refuse to forgive you? You know, darling, we shall be in a rather curious position when everything comes out, as we have made all our friends here under the name of Mowbray. Of course, the excuse for what we did is, that our real position is a hundred times higher than the one we assumed, and all those to whom we’ve been introduced would be delighted to know us in our own characters, at the end. But Leopold is a man, not a romantic girl, as you are. He has always had a reputation for pride and austerity, for being just before he would let himself be generous; and it may be that to one of his nature, a wild whim like yours—”

“You think of him as he was before we met, not as he is now, if you fancy he could be hard with a woman he really loved,” said Virginia, eagerly. “He’ll

forgive me, dear. I've no fear of him any more. To-night, I've no fear of anything. He loves me—and—I'm Empress of the world."

"Many women would be satisfied with Rhaetia," was the practical response which jumped into the mind of the Grand Duchess; but she would throw no more cold water upon the rose-flame of her daughter's exaltation. She kissed the girl on the forehead, breathing a few words of motherly sympathy; but when the Princess had flown off to her own room to dress, she shook her diamond-starred head doubtfully.

Virginia's plan sounded poetical, and as easy to carry out as to turn a kaleidoscope and form a charming new combination of color; or so it had seemed while the young voice pleaded. But, when the happy face and radiant eyes no longer illumined the path, the way ahead seemed dark.

To be sure the Princess had so far walked triumphantly along the high-road to success, but it was not always a good beginning which led to a good end; and the Grand Duchess felt, as she rang for Ernestine, that her nerves would be strained to breaking point until matters were definitely settled, for better or for worse.

Virginia had never been lovelier than she was that night at dinner, and Egon von Breitstein's admiration for her beauty had in it a fascinating new ingredient. Until yesterday, he had said to himself, "If she be not fair to me, what care I how fair she be?" But now, there was a vague idea that she might after all be for him, and he took enormous pleasure in the thought that he was falling in love with a girl who had captured the Emperor's heart.

Egon glanced very often at Leopold, contrasting his sovereign's appearance unfavorably with his own. The Emperor was thin and dark, with a grave cast of feature, while Egon's face kept the color and youthfulness of the early twenties. He was older than Leopold, but he looked a boy. Alma Tadema would have wreathed him with vine leaves, draped him with tiger skins, and set him down on a marble bench against a burning sapphire sky, where he would have appeared more suitably clad than in the stiff blue and silver uniform of a crack Rhaetian regiment.

Leopold, on the contrary, would never be painted except as a soldier; and it seemed to Egon that no normal girl could help thinking him a far handsomer fellow than the Emperor. For the moment, of course, Miss Mowbray did not notice him, because his Imperial Majesty loomed large in the foreground of her imagination; but the Chancellor had evidently a plan in his head for removing

that stately obstacle into the dim perspective.

Egon had not heard Miss Mowbray spoken of as an heiress, therefore, even had there been no Emperor in the way, he would not have worshiped at the shrine. But now, behold the shrine, attractive before, newly and alluringly decked! Egon wondered much over his half-brother's apparently impulsive offer, and the contradictory command, which had, a little later, enjoined waiting.

He was delighted, however, that he had not been forbidden to make himself agreeable; and his idea was, as soon as dinner should be over, to find a place at Miss Mowbray's side before any other man should have time to take it. But unluckily for this plan, Baron von Lyndal detained him for a few moments with praise of a new remedy which might cure the Chancellor's gout; and when he escaped from his host to look for Miss Mowbray in the white drawing-room she was not there.

From the music room adjoining, however, came sounds which drew him toward the door. He knew Miss Mowbray's soft, coaxing touch on the piano: she was there, "playing in a whisper," as he had heard her call it. Perhaps she was going to sing, as she had once or twice before, and would need some one to turn the pages of her music. Egon thought that he would much like to be the some one, and was in the act of parting the white velvet portières that covered the doorway, when his hostess smilingly beckoned him away.

"The Emperor has just asked Miss Mowbray to teach him some old-fashioned Scotch or English air (I'm afraid I don't quite know the difference!) called 'Annie Laurie,'" the Baroness explained. "He was charmed with it when she sang the other evening, and I've been assuring him that the song would exactly suit his voice. We mustn't disturb them while the lesson is going on. Tell me—I've hardly had a moment to ask you—how did you find the Chancellor?"

Chained to a forced allegiance, Egon mechanically answered the questions of the Baroness without making absurd mistakes, the while his ears burned to hear what was going on behind the white curtain.

Everybody knew of the music lesson, now, and chatted in tones of tactful monotony, never speaking too loudly to disturb the singers, never too cautiously, lest they should seem to listen. Once, and then again, the creamy *mezzo soprano* and the rich tenor that was almost a baritone, sang conscientiously through the verses of "Annie Laurie" from beginning to end; then a few desultory chords were struck on the piano; and at last there was silence behind the white curtains,

in the music room.

Were the two still there? To interrupt such a tête-a-tête seemed out of the question, but not to know what was happening Egon found too hard to bear, and the arrival of a telegram for Lady Mowbray came as opportunely as if Providence had had his special needs in mind.

Evidently it was not a pleasant telegram, for, as she read it, the Dresden china lady showed plainly that she was disconcerted. Her pretty face lost its color; her eyes dilated as if she had tasted a drop of belladonna on sugar; she patted her lips with her lace handkerchief, and finally rose from her chair, looking dazed and distressed.

“I’ve had rather bad news,” she admitted to Baroness von Lyndal, who was all solicitude. “Oh, nothing really serious, I trust, but still, disquieting. It is from a dear friend. I think I had better go to my room, and talk things over with Helen. Would you be kind enough to tell her when she comes in that she’s to follow me there? Don’t send for her till then; it’s not necessary. But I shall want her by and by.”

It was clear that Lady Mowbray did not wish her daughter to be disturbed. Still, Egon von Breitstein thought he might fairly let his anxiety run away with him. As the Baroness accompanied her guest to the door, he took it upon himself to search for Miss Mowbray, for now, if the Emperor should curse him for a spoil-sport, he would have the best of excuses. Lady Mowbray was in need of her daughter.

He lifted the white curtain and peeped through a small ante-chamber into the music room beyond. It was empty; but one of the long windows leading into the rose garden was wide open.

The month of September was dying, and away in the Rhaetian mountains winter had begun; yet in the lap of the low country summer lingered. The air was soft, and sweet with the perfume of roses, roses living, and roses dead in a potpourri of scattered petals on the grass. It was a garden for lovers, and a night for lovers.

Egon went to the open window and looked out, but dared not let his feet take the direction of his eyes, though he was sure that somewhere in the garden Miss Mowbray and the Emperor were to be found.

“They will come in again this way,” he said to himself, “for they will want

people to think they have never left the music room; and for that very reason they won’t stop too long. They must have some regard for the conventions. If I wait—”

He did not finish the sentence in his mind; nevertheless he examined the resources of the window niche with a critical eye.

There was a deep enclosure between the window frame and the long, straight curtains of olive green satin which matched the decoration of the music room. By drawing the curtains a few inches further forward, one could make a screen which would hide one from observation by any person in the room, or outside, in the garden. So Egon did draw the curtain, and framed in his shelter like a saint in a niche, he stood peering into the silver night.

The moon was rising over the lake, and long, pale rays of level light were stealing up the paths, like the fingers of a blind child that caress gropingly the features of a beloved face.

Egon could not see the whole garden, or all the paths among the roses; but if the Emperor and his companion came back by the way they had gone, he would know presently whether they walked in the attitude of friends or lovers. It was so necessary for his plans to know this, that he thought it worth while to exercise a little patience in waiting. Of course, if they were lovers, good-by to his hopes; and he would never have so good a chance as this to make sure.

All things in the garden that were not white were gray as a dove’s wings. Even the shadows were not black. And the sky was gray, with the soft gray of velvet, under a crust of diamonds which flashed as the spangles on a woman’s fan flash, when it trembles in her hand.

White moths, happily ignorant that summer would come no more for them, drifted out from the shadows like rose petals blown by the soft wind. On a trellis, a crowding sisterhood of pale roses drooped their heads downward *in memento mori*. It was a silver night; a night of enchantment.

Leopold had meant to take Virginia out only to see the moon rise over the water, turning the great smooth sheet of jet into a silver shield; for there had been clouds or spurts of rain on other nights, and he had said to himself that never again, perhaps, would they two stand together under the white spell of the moon. He had meant to keep her for five minutes, or ten at the most, and then to bring her back; but they had walked down to the path which girdled the cliff above the

lake. The moon touched her golden hair and her pure face like a benediction. He dared not look at her thus for long, and when there came a sudden quick rustling in the grass at their feet, he bent down, glad of any change in the current of his thoughts.

Some tiny, winged thing of the night sought a lodging in a bell-shaped flower whose blue color the moon had drunk, and as Leopold stooped, the same impulse made Virginia bend.

He stretched out his hand to gather the low-growing branch of blossoms, which he would give the girl as a souvenir of this hour, and their fingers met. Lake and garden swam before the eyes of the Princess as the Emperor's hand closed over hers.

Her great moment had come; yet now that it was here, womanlike she wished it away—not gone forever, oh no, but waiting just round the corner of the future.

"The flowers are yours—I give them to you," she laughed, as if she fancied it was in eagerness to grasp the disputed spray that he had pressed her fingers.

"You are the one flower I want—flower of all the world," he answered, in a choked voice, speaking words he had not meant to speak; but the ice barriers that held back the torrent of which he had told her, had melted long ago and now had been swept away. Other barriers which he had built up in their place—his convictions, his duty as a man at the head of a nation—were gone too. "I love you," he stammered, "I love you far better than my life, which you saved. I've loved you ever since our first hour together on the mountain, but every day my love has grown a thousand fold, until now it's greater and higher than any mountain. I can fight against myself no longer. I thought I was strong, but this love is stronger than I am. Say that you care for me—only say that."

"I do care," Virginia whispered. She had prayed for this, lived for this, and she was drowning in happiness. Yet she had pictured a different scene, a scene of storm and stress. She had heard in fancy broken words of sorrow and noble renunciation on his lips, and in anticipating his suffering she had felt the joy her revelation would give. "I care—so much, so much! How hard it will be to part."

"If you care, then we shall not be parted," said Leopold.

The Princess looked up at him in wonder, holding back as he would have caught her in his arms. What could he mean? What plan was in his mind that, believing

her to be Helen Mowbray, yet made it possible for him to reassure her so?

“I don’t understand,” she faltered. “You are the Emperor, and I am no more than __”

“You are my wife, if you love me.”

In the shock of her ecstatic surprise she was helpless to resist him longer, and he held her close and passionately, his lips on her hair, her face crushed against his heart. She could hear it beating, feel it throb under her cheek. His wife? Then he loved her enough for that. Yet how was it possible for him to stand ready, for her sake, to override the laws of his own land?

“My darling—my wife!” he said again. “To think that you love me.”

“I have loved you from the first,” the Princess confessed, “but I was afraid you would feel, even if you cared, that we must say good-by. Now—” And in an instant the whole truth would have been out; but the word “good-by” stabbed him, and he could not let it pass.

“We shall not say good-by, not for an hour,” he cried. “After this I could not lose you. There’s nothing to prevent my being your husband, you my wife. Would to God you were of Royal blood, and you should be my Empress—the fairest Empress that poet or historian ever saw—but we’re prisoners of Fate, you and I. We must take the goods the gods provide. My goddess you will always be, but the Empress of Rhaetia, even my love isn’t powerful enough to make you. If I am to you only half what you are to me, you’ll be satisfied with the empire of my heart.”

Suddenly the warm blood in Virginia’s veins grew chill. It was as if a wind had blown up from the dark depths of the lake, to strike like ice into her soul. An instant more and he would have known that she was a Princess of the Blood, and through his whole life she could have gone on worshiping him because he had been ready to break down all barriers for her love, before he guessed there need be none to break. Now her warm impulse of gratitude was frozen by the biting blast of disillusionment; but still there was hope left. It might be that she misunderstood him. She would not judge him yet.

“The empire of your heart,” she echoed. “If that were mine I should be richer than with all the treasures of the earth. If you were Leo, the chamois hunter, I would love you as I love you now, because in yourself you are the one man for

me; and I'd go with you to the end of the world, as your wife. But you're not the chamois hunter; you are the man I love, yet you are the Emperor. Being the Emperor, had you talked of a hopeless love and a promise not to forget, having nothing else to give me, because of your high destiny and my humbler one, I could still have been happy. Yet you speak of more than that. You speak of something I can't understand. It seems to me that what a Royal man offers the woman he loves should be all or nothing."

"I do offer you all," said Leopold. "All myself, my life, the heart and soul of me—all that's my own to give. The rest—belongs to Rhaetia."

"Then what do you mean by—"

"Don't you understand, my sweet, that I've asked you to be my wife? What can a man ask more of a woman?"

"Your wife—but not the Empress. How can the two be apart?"

He tried to take her once more in his arms, but when he saw that she would not have it so, he held his love in check, and waited. He was sure that he would not need to wait long, for not only had he laid his love at her feet, but had pledged himself to a tremendous sacrifice on love's altar.

The step which in a moment of passion he had now resolved to take would create dissension among his people, alienate one who had been his second father, rouse England, America and Germany to anger, because of the Princess whose name rumor had already coupled with his, and raise in every direction a storm of disapproval. When this girl whom he loved realized the immensity of the concession he was making because of his reverent love for her, she would give her life to him, now and forever.

Tenderly he took her hand and lifted it to his lips; then, when she did not draw it away (because he was to have his chance of explanation) he held it between both his own, as he talked on.

"Dearest one," he said, "when I first knew I loved you—loved you as I didn't dream I could love a woman—for your sake and my own, I would have avoided meeting you too often. This I tell you frankly. I didn't see how, in honor, such a love could end except in despair for me, and sorrow even for you, if you should come to care. Had you and Lady Mowbray stayed on at the hotel in Kronburg, I think I could have held to my resolve. But when Baroness von Lyndal suggested

your coming here, my heart leaped up. I said in my mind, ‘At least I shall have the joy of seeing her every day, for a time, without doing anything to darken her future. Afterwards, when she has gone out of my life, I shall have that radiance to remember. And so no harm will be done in the end, except that I shall have to pay, by suffering.’ Still, I had no thought of the future without a parting; I felt that inevitable. And the suffering came hand in hand with the joy, for not a night here at Lyndalberg have I slept. If I had been weak, I should have groaned aloud in the agony of renunciation.

“My rooms open on a lawn. More than once I’ve come out into the darkness, when all the household was sleeping. Some times I have walked to this very spot where you and I stand now—heart to heart for the first time, my darling—asking myself whether there were any way out of the labyrinth. It was not until I brought you here and saw you by my side with the moon rays for a crown, that a flash of blinding light seemed to pierce the clouds. Suddenly I saw all things clearly, and though there will be difficulties, I count them as overcome.”

“Still you haven’t answered my question,” said Virginia in a low, strained voice.

“I’m coming to that now. It was best that you should know first all that’s been troubling my heart and brain during these few, bitter-sweet days which have taught me so much. You know, men who have their place at the head of great nations can’t think first of themselves, or even of those they love better than themselves. If they hope to snatch at personal happiness, they must take the one way open to them, and be thankful.

“Don’t do me the horrible injustice to believe that I wouldn’t be proud to show you to my subjects as their Empress; but instead, I can offer only what men of Royal blood for hundreds of years have offered to women whom they honored as well as loved. You must have heard even in England of what is called a morganatic marriage? It is that I offer you.”

With a cry of pain—the cruel pain of wounded, disappointed love—the Princess tore her hand from his.

“Never!” she exclaimed. “It’s an insult.”

“An insult? No, a thousand times no. I see that even now you don’t understand.”

“I think that I understand very well, too well,” said Virginia, brokenly. The beautiful fairy palace of happiness that she had watched as it grew, lay shattered,

destroyed in the moment which ought to have seen its triumphant completion.

"Never!" she exclaimed. "It's an insult

"Never!" she exclaimed. "It's an insult"

"I tell you that you cannot understand, or you wouldn't say—you wouldn't dare to say, my love—that I'd insulted you. Don't you see, don't you know, that you would be my wife in the sight of all men, as well as in the sight of God."

"Your wife, you call it!" the Princess gave a harsh little laugh which hurt as tears could not hurt. "You seem to have strange ideas of that word, which has always been sacred to me. A morganatic marriage! That is a mere pretense, an hypocrisy. I would be 'your wife,' you say. I would give you all my love, all my life. You, in return, would give me—your left hand. And you know well that, in a country which tolerates such a one-sided travesty of marriage, the laws would hold you free to marry another woman—a Royal woman, whom you could make an Empress—as free as if I had no existence."

"Great Heaven, that you should speak so!" he broke out. "What if the law did hold me free? Can you dream—do you put me so low as to dream that my heart would hold me free? My soul would be bound to you forever."

"So you may believe, now. But the knowledge that you could change would be death to me—a death to die daily. Yes, I tell you again, it was an insult to offer a lot so miserable, so contemptible, to a woman you profess to love. How could you do it? If only you had never spoken the hateful words! If only you had left me the ideal I had of you—noble, glorious, above the whole world of men. But after all you are selfish,—cruel. If you had said 'I love you, yet we must part, for Duty stands between us.' I could—but no, I can never tell you now what I could have answered if you had said that, instead of breaking my heart."

Under the fire of her reproach he stood still, his lips tight, his shoulders braced, as if he held his breast open for the knife.

"By Heaven, it is you who are cruel," he said at last. "How can I make you see your injustice?"

"In no way. There's nothing more to be said between us two after this, except—good-by."

"It shall not be good-by."

“It must. I wish it.”

He had caught her dress as she turned to go, but now he released her. “You wish it? It’s not true that you love me, then?”

“It was true. Everything—everything in my whole life—is changed from this hour. It would be better if I’d never seen you. Good-by.”

CHAPTER XI

THE MAN WHO WAITED

She ran from him, along the moonlit path. One step he took as if to follow and keep her, but checked himself and let her go. Only his eyes went with her, and in them there was more of pain than anger, though never before in all his life, perhaps, had he been thwarted in any strong desire. Passion urged him forward, but pride held him back; for Leopold was a proud man, and to have his love thrown in his face, was to receive an icy douche with the blood at fever heat.

For this girl's sake he had in a few days changed the habits of a lifetime. Pride, reserve, self-control, the wish not only to appear, but to be a man, above the frailties of common men, the ambition to be placed, and worthily placed, on a pedestal by his subjects; all these he had thrown away for Helen Mowbray.

He was too just a man not to admit that, if one of his Royal cousins of younger branches, had contemplated such folly as this, he would have done his best to nip that folly while it was in bud. "He jests at scars who never felt a wound"; and until Leopold had learned by his own unlooked-for experience what love can mean, what men will do for love while the sweet madness is on them, he would have been utterly unable to understand the state of mind.

A cousin inclined to act as he was now bent on acting, would but a month ago have found all the Emperor's influence, even force perhaps, brought to bear in restraining him. Leopold saw the change in himself, was startled and shamed by it; nevertheless he would have persevered, trampling down every obstacle that rose in his way, if only the girl had seen things with his eyes.

She had accused him of insulting her, not stopping to consider that, even to make her morganatically his wife, he must give great cause for complaint not only to his ministers but to his people. For he was expected to marry a girl of Royal blood, that the country might have an heir. If Helen Mowbray had accepted the position he offered her, he could never have broken her heart by making another marriage.

Not only would it be difficult in these days to find a Princess willing to tolerate such a rival, but it would have been impossible for him to desecrate the bond between himself and the one adored woman.

This being the case, with Helen Mowbray as his morganatic wife, there could be no direct heir to the throne. At his death, the son of his uncle, the Archduke Joseph, would succeed; and during his life the popularity which was dear to him would be hopelessly forfeited. Rhaetia would never forgive him for selfishly preferring his own private happiness to the good of the nation.

He could fancy how old Iron Heart von Breitstein would present this point of view to him, with fierce eloquence, temples throbbing like the ticking of a watch, eyes netted with bloodshot veins. But on the other hand he could picture himself standing calmly to face the storm, steadfast in his own indomitable will, happy with love to uphold him.

But now, the will which had borne him through life in a triumphal march, had been powerless against that of this young girl. She would have none of him. A woman whose face was her fortune, whose place in life was hardly as high as the first step of a throne, had refused—an Emperor.

Hardly could Leopold believe the thing that had happened to him. He had spoken of doubting that he had won her love; and he had doubted. But he had allowed himself to hope, because he had confidence in his Star, and because, perhaps, it had scarcely been known in the annals of history that an Emperor's suit should be repulsed.

Besides, he had loved the girl so passionately, that it seemed she could not remain cold. And he hoped still that, when she had passed a long night in reflection, in thinking over the situation, perhaps taking counsel with that comparatively commonplace yet practical little lady, her mother, she might be ready to change her mind.

For the first few moments after the stinging rebuff he had endured, Leopold felt that, if she did, it would be her turn to suffer, for he could never humble himself to implore for the second time. But, as he stood in the soft stillness of the night, gazing towards the lights of the house, thoughts of Virginia—her youth, her sweetness, her beauty dimmed with grief,—overwhelmed him. Could he have reached her, he would have fallen on his knees, and kissed her gown.

By and by a vast tenderness breathed its calm over the thwarted passion in his breast, and plans to win her back came whispering in his ear. He would write a letter and send it to her room. But no; perhaps it would be wise to give her a longer interval for reflection and—it might be—regret. To-morrow he would see her and show all the depths of that great love which she had thought to throw

away. She could not go on withstanding him forever; and now that he had burned his boats behind him, he would never think of turning back. He would persevere till she should yield.

Meanwhile Virginia had hurried blindly toward the house, and it was instinct rather than intention that led her to the open window of the music room, by which she had come out.

Tears burned her eyelids, but they did not fall until she stood once more in the room where she and Leopold had been happy together. There she had sat at the piano, and he had bent over her, love in his eyes—honest love, she had thought, her heart full of thanksgiving. How little she had guessed then the humiliation in store for her, and the end of all her hopes! How could she bear her pain, and how could she go on living out her life?

She paused in the window niche, looking into the room through a mist of tears, and a sob choked her. “Cruel—cruel,” she whispered. “What agony—what an insult!”

Then, dashing away her tears, she pushed back the dark curtain, and would have passed on into the room, had not the quick gesture brought her arm into contact with the buttons and gold braid on a man’s breast.

Instantly she realized that some one was hiding there—some one dressed in a military coat; and her first impulse was for flight—anything to escape, unrecognized. But on second thoughts she changed her mind.

Whoever it was had in all probability hidden himself for the purpose of spying, and was already aware that Miss Mowbray had rushed into the house weeping, after a tête-a-tête with the Emperor in the garden. Perhaps he had even caught a word or two of her sobbing ejaculation. No, she must not run away, and leave the outcome of this affair to chance. She must see with whom she had to deal, that she might know what was best to do.

She had taken a step into the room, but quick as light she turned, pulled away the screen of curtain and faced Captain von Breitstein.

It was a trying moment for him, and the girl’s look stripped him of all his light audacity. She had come to the window by a different path from the one he had watched, therefore she had taken him unawares, before he had time to escape, as he had planned. He was caught fairly, and must save himself as best he could

without preparation.

If her reproach forestalled his excuse, he was lost. He must step into the breach at whatever risk. No time to weigh words; he must let loose the first that sprang to his lips.

“I see what you think of me,” he said. “I see you think I was watching you. I swear I wasn’t, though I knew you were in the garden with—the Emperor. Wait—you must listen. You must hear my justification. I was sent to this room to fetch you. For your sake, how could I go back and say you had disappeared—together? I looked out into the garden and saw you—with him. I saw from your manner that—he had made you suffer. I was half mad with rage, guessing—guessing something which one word you let drop as you came in, told me had happened. He is my sovereign, but—he has insulted you. Let me be your knight, as in days of old. Let me defend you, for I love you. I waited here to tell you this, as you came, so that, if you would, we might announce an engagement—”

If Virginia’s eyes had been daggers, he would have fallen at her feet, pierced to the heart. For one long second she looked at him without speaking, her face eloquent. Then she went by him with the proud bearing of a queen.

Egon was stricken dumb. Dully he watched her move across the room to a door which led into a corridor. He heard the whisper of her satin dress, and saw the changing lights and shadows on its creamy folds, under the crystal chandeliers; he saw the white reflection, like a spirit, mirrored deep under the polished surface of the floor.

Never had she been more beautiful; but she was beautiful in his eyes no longer. He had hurt her pride; but she had stabbed his vanity; and to wound Egon von Breitstein’s vanity was to strike at his life. He hated the girl, hated her so sharply that his nerves ached with the intensity of his hatred; and the only relief he could have would be through reprisal.

He had not been able to deceive her. She knew that he had been spying, and it was fortunate for his future, he realized already, that she had broken with the Emperor. He must do all he could, and do it quickly, to prevent a reconciliation, lest she should work him injury.

As for his hastily stammered proposal, it was a good thing that the girl had not taken him at his word, for the Chancellor had not given him permission to speak, and if she had accepted him, he might have had to wriggle out of his

engagement. Still, he could not forgive her scorn of him.

“Lorenz shall help me to pay her for this!” he said furiously to himself, too angry to mourn over lost hopes, lost opportunities. “He will know how to punish her. And between us she shall suffer.”

CHAPTER XII

“THE EMPEROR WILL UNDERSTAND”

It was for refuge that the Princess fled to her own room.

A boudoir shared by the Grand Duchess adjoined it, and entering there, to her dismay the girl saw her mother lying on a sofa, attended by Ernestine, the French maid.

Virginia’s heart sank. She had supposed the Grand Duchess to be in the white drawing-room with the Baroness, and the other guests of the house. Now there was no hope that she might be left alone and unquestioned. And the girl had longed to be alone.

“At last!” exclaimed a faint voice from the sofa. “I thought you would never come.”

The Princess stared, half-dazed, unable yet to tear her mind from her private griefs. “Are you ill, Mother?” she stammered. “Had you sent for me?”

“I came very near fainting in the drawing-room,” the Grand Duchess answered. “Ernestine, you may leave us now.”

The French woman went out noiselessly.

Still Virginia did not speak. Could it be that there had been another spy, beside Egon von Breitstein, and that her mother already knew how the castle of cards had fallen? Was it the news of defeat which had prostrated her?

“Have you—did any one tell you?” the girl faltered.

“I’ve had a telegram—a horrible telegram. Oh, Virginia, I am not young, as you are. I am too old to endure all this. I think you should not have subjected me to it.”

The Grand Duchess’s voice was plaintive, and pried among the girl’s sick nerves, like hot wire.

“What do you mean, dear? I don’t understand,” she said, dully. “I’m so sorry you are ill. If it’s my fault in any way, I—”

Her mother pointed toward a writing table. “The telegram is there,” she murmured. “It is too distressing—too humiliating.”

Virginia picked up a crumpled telegraph form and began to read the message, which was dated London and written in English. “Some one making inquiries here about the Mowbrays. Beg to advise you to explain all at once, or leave Kronburg, to avoid almost certain complications. Lambert.”

Lady Lambert was the wife of the ex-Ambassador to the Court of Rhaetia from Great Britain.

The Princess finished in silence.

“Isn’t it hideous?” asked the Grand Duchess. “To think that you and I should have deliberately placed ourselves in such a position! We are to run away, like detected adventuresses, unless—unless you are now ready to tell the Emperor all.”

“No,” said Virginia, hopelessly.

“What! Not yet? Oh, my dear, then you must bring matters to a crisis—instantly—to-night even. It’s evident that some enemy—perhaps some jealous person—has been at work behind our backs. It is for you to turn the tables upon him, and there isn’t an hour to waste. From the first, you meant to make some dramatic revelation. Now, the time has come.”

“Ah, I meant—I meant!” echoed Virginia, with a sob breaking the ice in her voice. “Nothing has turned out as I meant. You were right, dear; I was wrong. We ought never to have come to Rhaetia.”

The Grand Duchess grew paler than before. She had been vaguely distressed. Now, she was sharply alarmed. If Virginia admitted that this great adventure should never have been undertaken, then indeed the earth must be quaking under their feet.

“Ought not—to have come?” she repeated, piteously. “What dreadful thing has happened?”

The Princess stood with bent head. “It’s hard to tell,” she said, “harder, almost, than anything I ever had to do. But it must be done. Everything’s at an end, dear.”

“What—you’ve told him, and he has refused to forgive?”

“He knows nothing.”

“For Heaven’s sake, don’t keep me in suspense.”

Virginia’s lips were dry. “He asked me to be his wife,” she said. “Oh, wait—wait! Don’t look happy. You don’t understand, and I didn’t, at first. He had to explain and—he put the thing as little offensively as he could. Oh, Mother, he thinks me only good enough to be his morganatic wife!”

The storm had burst at last, and the Princess fell on her knees by the sofa where, burying her face in her mother’s lap, she sobbed as if parting with her youth.

There had always been mental and temperamental barriers between the Dresden china lady and her daughter; but they loved each other, and never had the girl been so dear to her mother as now. The Grand Duchess thought of the summer day when Virginia had knelt beside her, saying, “We are going to have an adventure, you and I.”

Alas, the adventure was over, and summer and hope were dead. Tears trembled in the mother’s eyes. Poor little Virginia, so young, so inexperienced, and, in spite of her self-will and recklessness, so sweet and loving withal!

“But, dear, but, you are making the worst of things,” the Grand Duchess said soothingly, her hand on the girl’s bright hair. “Why, instead of crying you ought to be smiling, I think. Leopold must love you desperately, or he would never have proposed marriage—even morganatic marriage. Just at first, the idea must have shocked you—knowing who you are. But remember, if you were Miss Mowbray, it would have been a triumph. Many women of high position have married Royalty morganatically, and every one has respected them. You seem to forget that the Emperor knows you only as Helen Mowbray.”

“He ought to have known that Helen Mowbray was not the girl to consent—no, not more easily than Virginia of Baumenburg-Drippe. He should have understood without telling, that to a girl with Anglo-Saxon blood in her veins such an offer would be like a blow over the heart.”

“How should he understand? He is Rhaetian. His point of view—”

“His point of view to me is terrible. Oh, Mother, it’s useless to argue. Everything is spoiled. Of course if he knew I was Princess Virginia, he would be sorry for

what he had proposed, even if he thought I'd brought it on myself. But then, it would be too late. Don't you understand, I valued his love because it was given to *me*, not the Princess? If he said, 'Now I know you, I can offer my right hand instead of my left, to you as my wife,' that would not be the same thing at all. No, there's nothing left but to go home; and the Emperor of Rhaetia must be told that Virginia of Baumenburg-Drippe has decided not to marry. That will be our one revenge—but a pitiful one, since he'll never know that the Princess who refuses his right hand and the Helen Mowbray who wouldn't take his left, are one and the same. Oh Mother, I did love him so! Let us get out of this hateful house as soon as we can."

The Grand Duchess knew her daughter, and abandoned hope. "Yes, if you will not forgive him; we must go at once, and save our dignity if we can," she said. "The telegram will give us our excuse. I told the Baroness I had received bad news, and she asked permission to knock at my door before going to bed, and inquire how I was feeling. She may come at any moment. We must say that the telegram recalls us immediately to England."

"Listen!" whispered Virginia. "I think there's some one at the door now."

Baroness von Lyndal stood aghast on hearing that she was to be deserted early in the morning by the bright, particular star of her house party—after the Emperor. She begged that Lady Mowbray would reconsider; that she would wire to England, instead of going, or at all events that she would wait for one day more, until Leopold's visit to Schloss Lyndalberg should be over.

In her anxiety, she even failed in tact, when she found arguments useless. "But the Emperor?" she objected. "If you go off early in the morning, before he or any one comes down, what will he think, what will he say at being cheated out of his *au revoir*?"

The Grand Duchess hesitated; but Virginia answered firmly "I said good-by to him to-night. The Emperor—will understand."

CHAPTER XIII

THE MAGIC CITRON

Breakfast at Schloss Lyndalberg was an informal meal, under the reign of Mechtilde. Those who were sociably inclined, appeared. Those who loved not their species until the day was older, ate in their rooms.

Leopold had shown himself at the table each morning, however, and set the fashion. And the day after the parting in the garden, he was earlier even than usual. It was easy to be early, as he had not been to bed that night; but he had an extra incentive. He could scarcely wait to see how Helen Mowbray would meet him; whether she would still be cold, or whether sound advice from her mother would have made her kind.

This was his last day at Lyndalberg. By his special request no program of entertainment had been arranged; and before coming down to breakfast Leopold had been turning over in his mind plan after plan for another chance of meeting the girl alone. He had even written a letter, but had torn it up, because he was unable to say on paper what was really in his heart.

Breakfast passed, however, and when she did not appear, Leopold grew restless. He did not ask for her before the others; but when he and the Baroness had strolled out together on the terrace, where white peacocks spread their jeweled tails, the Emperor sought some opportunity of bringing in the name that filled his thoughts.

“I see the red October lilies are opening,” he said. “Miss Mowbray will be interested. She tells me there’s nothing like them in England.”

“Ah, she has gone just too soon!” sighed the Baroness.

The Emperor glanced quickly from the mass of crimson flowers, to his hostess’s face. “Gone?” he repeated.

“Yes,” the Baroness answered. “They must have reached Kronburg before this. You know, they left their companion there. Perhaps your Majesty did not realize that they were leaving here quite so early?”

He turned so white under the brown tan the mountains had given, that the Baroness was alarmed. She had taken Virginia’s words as Virginia had meant her

to take them, and therefore supposed that a formal farewell of some sort had been spoken. This impression did not prevent her from guessing that there must have been a misunderstanding, and she was tingling with a lively curiosity which she was obliged carefully to hide.

The romance which had been enacted under her eyes she believed to be largely of her own making; and, not being a bad-hearted woman, she had grown fond of Virginia. She had even had pangs of conscience; and though she could not see the way for a happy ending to the pretty drama, it distressed her that the curtain should go down on sadness.

“I did not know they were going at all,” Leopold answered frankly, willing to sacrifice his pride for the sake of coming quickly at the truth.

“Oh!” exclaimed the Baroness. “I am distressed! Miss Mowbray distinctly said, when I begged that they would wait, ‘the Emperor will understand.’”

“I do understand—now I know they have gone,” he admitted. “But—Miss Mowbray thinks she has some cause of complaint against me, and she’s mistaken. I can’t let such a mistake go uncorrected. You say they must be at Kronburg before this. Are they staying on there?”

“I’m afraid not, your Majesty. They leave Kronburg for England to-day by the Orient Express.”

“Do you happen to remember at what hour the train starts?”

“I believe at twelve.”

Leopold pulled out his watch. It was twenty minutes past eleven. Forty times sixty seconds, and the girl would be gone.

The blood rushed to his face. Barring accidents, he could catch her if he ordered his motor-car, and left at once. But to cut short his visit at Schloss Lyndalberg, would be virtually to take the world into his secret. Let him allege important state business at the capital, if he chose, gossip would still say that the girl had fled, that he had pursued her. The Baroness knew already; others would chatter as if they knew; that was inevitable—if he went.

A month ago (when yielding to inclination meant humbling his pride as Emperor and man), such a question would have answered itself. Now, it answered itself also, the only difference being that the answer was exactly opposite to what it

would have been a month earlier.

“Baroness, forgive me,” he said quickly. “I must go. I can’t explain.”

“You need not try,” she answered him, softly.

“Thank you, a hundred times. Make everything as straight for me as you can. Say what you will. I give you *carte blanche*, for we’re old friends, and I trust you.”

“It’s for me to thank your Majesty. You want your motor-car?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll telephone. Your chauffeur will have it here in six minutes. And your aide-de-camp. Will you—”

“I don’t want him, thanks. I’d rather go alone.”

Seven minutes later the big white motor-car was at the door which was the private entrance to the Emperor’s suite; and the Emperor was waiting for it, having forgotten all about the sable-lined coat which had been a present from the Czar. If it had been mid-winter, he would have forgotten, just the same; nor would he have known that it was cold.

There was plenty of time now to carry out his plan, which was to catch the Orient Express at the Kronburg station, and present himself to the Mowbrays in the train, later. As to what would happen afterwards, it was beyond planning; but Leopold knew that the girl had loved him; and he hoped that he would have Lady Mowbray on his side.

The only way of reaching Kronburg from Schloss Lyndalberg was by road; there was no railway connection between the two places. But the town and the castle were separated by a short eight miles, and until checked by traffic in the suburbs, the sixty horse-power car could cover a mile in less than two minutes.

Unfortunately, however, police regulations were strict, and of this Leopold could not complain, as he had approved them himself. Once, he was stopped, and would certainly not have been allowed to proceed, had he not revealed himself as the Emperor, the owner of the one unnumbered car in Rhaetia. As it was, he had suffered a delay of five minutes; and just as he was congratulating himself on the goodness of his tires, which had made him no trouble for many weeks, a

loud report as of a pistol shot gave warning of a puncture.

But there was not a moment to waste on repairs, Leopold drove on, on the rims, only to acknowledge presently the truth of an old proverb, “the more haste the less speed.”

Delayed by a torn and flapping tire, the car arrived at the big Central Station of Kronburg only five minutes before twelve. Leopold dashed in, careless whether he were recognized or no, and was surprised at the absence of the crowd which usually throngs the platform before the departure of the most important train of the day.

“Is the Orient Express late?” he asked of an inspector to whom he was but a man among other men.

“No, sir. Just on time. Went out five minutes ago.”

“But it isn’t due to start till twelve.”

“Summer time-table, sir. Autumn time-table takes effect to-day, the first of October. Orient Express departure changed to eleven-fifty.”

An unreasoning rage against fate boiled in the Emperor’s breast. He ruled this country, yet everything in it seemed to conspire in a plot to wreck his dearest desires.

For a few seconds he stood speechless, feeling as if he had been dashed against a blank wall, and there were no way of getting round it. Yet the seconds were but few, for Leopold was not a man of slow decisions.

His first step was to inquire the name of the town at which the Orient Express stopped soonest. In three hours, he learnt, it would reach Felgarde, the last station on the Rhaetian side of the frontier.

His first thought on hearing this was to engage a special, and follow; but even in these days there is much red tape entangled with railway regulations in Rhaetia. It soon appeared that it would be quicker to take the next train to Felgarde, which was due to leave in half an hour, and would arrive only an hour later than the Orient Express.

Leopold’s heart was chilled, but he shook off despondency and would not be discouraged. Telephoning to the hotel where the Mowbrays had been stopping,

he learned that they had gone. Then he wrote out a telegram: “Miss Helen Mowbray, Traveling from Kronburg to Paris by Orient Express, Care of Station-master at Felgarde. I implore you leave the train at Felgarde and wait for me. Am following in all haste. Will arrive Felgarde one hour after you, and hope to find you at Leopoldhof.” So far the wording was simple. He had signified his intention and expressed his wish, which would have been more than enough to assure the accomplishment of his purpose, had he been dealing with a subject. Unfortunately, however, Helen Mowbray was not a subject, and had exhibited no sign of subjection. It was therefore futile to prophesy whether or no she would choose to grant his request.

Revolving the pros and cons he was forced to conclude that she probably would not grant it—unless he had some new argument to bring forward. Yet what had he to urge that he had not already urged twice over? What could he say at this eleventh hour which would not only induce her to await his coming at Felgarde, but justify him in making a last appeal when he came to explain it in person?

As he stood pen in hand, suddenly he found himself recalling a fairy story which he had never tired of reading in his childhood. Under the disguise of fancy, it was a lesson against vacillation, and he had often said to himself as a boy, that when he grew up, he would not, like the Prince of the story, miss a gift of the gods through weak hesitation.

The pretty legend in his mind had for a hero a young prince who went abroad to seek his fortune, and received from one of the Fates to whom he paid a visit, three magic citrons which he must cut open by the side of a certain fountain. He obeyed his instructions; but when from the first citron sprang an exquisite fairy maiden, demanding a drink of water, the young man lost his presence of mind. While he sat staring, the lovely lady vanished; and with a second experiment it was the same. Only the third citron remained of the Fates’ squandered gifts, and when the Prince cut it in half, the maiden who appeared was so much more beautiful than her sisters, that in adoring wonder he almost lost her as he had lost the others.

“My knife is on the rind of the last citron now,” Leopold said to himself. “Let me not lose the one chance I have left.”

Last night he had believed that there would not be room in a man’s heart for more love than his held for Helen Mowbray; but realizing to the full how great was the danger of losing her, he found that his love had grown beyond

reckoning.

He had thought it a sacrifice to suggest a morganatic marriage. Now, a voice seemed to say in his ear, “The price you offered was not enough. Is love worth all to you or not?” And he answered, “It is worth all. I will offer all, yet not count it a sacrifice. That is love, and nothing less is love.”

A white light broke before his eyes, like a meteor bursting, and the voice in his ear spoke words that sent a flame through his veins.

“I will do it,” he said. “Who is there among my people who will dare say ‘no’ to their Emperor’s ‘yes’? I will make a new law. I will be a law unto myself.”

His face, that had been pale, was flushed. He tore up the unfinished telegram, and wrote another, which he signed “Leo, the Chamois Hunter.” Then, when he had handed in the message, and paid, there was but just time to buy his ticket, engage a whole first-class compartment, for himself, and dash into it, before his train was due to start.

As it moved slowly out of the big station, Leopold’s brain rang with the noble music of his great resolve. He could see nothing, think of nothing but that. His arms ached to clasp his love; his lips, cheated last night, already felt her kisses; for she would give them now, and she would give herself. He was treading the past of an Empire under foot, in the hope of a future with her; and every throb of the engine was taking him nearer to the threshold of that future.

But such moments of supreme exaltation come rarely in a lifetime. The heart of man or woman could not beat on for long with such wild music for accompaniment; and so it was that, as the moments passed, the song of the Emperor’s blood fell to a minor key. He thought passionately of Virginia, but he thought of his country as well, and tried to weigh the effect upon others of the thing that he was prepared to do. There was no one on earth whom Leopold of Rhaetia need fear, but there was one to whom he owed much, one whom it would be grievious to offend.

In his father’s day, one man—old even then—had built upon the foundations of a tragic past, a great and prosperous nation. This man had been to Leopold what his father had never been; and without the magic power of inspiring warm affection, had instilled respect and gratitude in the breast of an enthusiastic boy.

“Poor old von Breitstein!” the Emperor sighed; “The country is his idol—the

country with all the old traditions. He'll feel this break sorely. I'd spare him if I could; but I can't live my life for him—"

He sighed again, and looked up frowning at a sudden sound which meant intrusion.

Like a spirit called from the deep, there stood the Chancellor at the door between Leopold's compartment and the one adjoining.

CHAPTER XIV

THE EMPEROR AT BAY

Iron Heart was dressed in the long, double-breasted gray overcoat and the soft gray hat in which all snapshot photographs (no others had ever been taken) showed the Chancellor of Rhaetia.

At sight of the Emperor off came the famous hat, baring the bald dome of the fine old head, fringed with hair of curiously mingled black and white.

“Good day, your Majesty,” he said, with no sign of surprise in his voice or face.

The train rocked, going round a curve, and it was with difficulty that the Chancellor kept his footing; but he stood rigidly erect, supporting himself in the doorway, until the Emperor with more politeness than enthusiasm, invited him to enter and be seated.

“I’m glad you’re well enough to travel, Chancellor,” said Leopold. “We had none too encouraging an account of you from Captain von Breitstein.”

“I travel because you travel, your Majesty,” replied the old man. “It is kind of you to tolerate me here, and I appreciate it.”

Now, they sat facing each other; and the young man, fighting down a sense of guilt—familiar to him in boyish days, when about to be taken to task by the Chancellor—gazed fixedly at the hard, clever face on which the afternoon sun scored the detail of each wrinkle.

“Indeed?” was the Emperor’s only answer.

“Your Majesty, I have served you and your father before you, well, I hope, faithfully, I know. I think you trust me.”

“No man more. But this sounds a portentous preface. Is it possible you imagine it necessary to ‘lead up’ to a subject, if I can please myself by doing you a favor?”

“If I have seemed to lead up to what I wish to say, your Majesty, it is only for the sake of explanation. You are wondering, no doubt, how I knew you would travel to-day, and in this train; also why I have ventured to follow. Your intention I

learned by accident." (The Chancellor did not explain by what diplomacy that "accident" had been brought about.) "Wishing much to talk over with you a pressing matter that should not be delayed, I took this liberty, and seized this opportunity.

"Some men would, in my place, pretend that business of their own had brought them, and that the train had been chosen by chance. But your Majesty knows me as a blunt man, when I serve him not as diplomat, but as friend. I'm not one to work in the dark with those who trust me, and I want your Majesty to know the truth." (Which perhaps he did, but not the whole truth.)

"You raise my curiosity," said Leopold.

"Then have I your indulgence to speak frankly, not entirely as a humble subject to his Emperor, but as an old man to a young man?"

"I'd have you speak as a friend," said Leopold. But a slight constraint hardened his voice, as he prepared himself for something disagreeable.

"I've had a letter from the Crown Prince of Hungaria. It has come to his ears that there is a certain reason for your Majesty's delay in following up the first overtures for an alliance with his family. Malicious tongues have whispered that your Majesty's attentions are otherwise engaged; and the young Adalbert has addressed me in a friendly way begging that the rumor may be contradicted or confirmed."

"I'm not sure that negotiations had gone far enough to give him the right to be inquisitive," returned Leopold, flushing.

The Chancellor spread out his old, veined hands in a gesture of appeal. "I fear," he said, "that in my anxiety for your Majesty's welfare and the good of Rhaetia, I may have exceeded my instructions. My one excuse is, that I believed your mind to be definitely made up. I still believe it to be so. I would listen to no one who should try to persuade me of the contrary, and I will write Adalbert—"

"You must get yourself and me out of the scrape as best you can, since you admit you got us into it," broke in the Emperor, with an uneasy laugh. "If Princess Virginia of Baumenburg-Drippe is as charming as she is said to be, her difficulty will be in choosing a husband, not in getting one. For once, my dear Chancellor, gossip has told the truth; and I wouldn't pay the Princess so poor a compliment as to ask for her hand, when I've no heart left to give her in exchange for it.

There’s some one else—”

“It is of that some one else I would venture to speak, your Majesty. Gossip has named her. May I?”

“I’ll save you the trouble. For I’m not ashamed that the common fate has overtaken me—common, because every man loves once before he dies; and yet uncommon, because no man ever loved a woman so worthy. Chancellor, there’s no woman in the world like Miss Helen Mowbray, the lady to whom I owe my life.”

“It’s natural you should be grateful, your Majesty, but—”

“It’s natural I should be in love.”

“Natural that a young man inexperienced in affairs of the heart, should mistake warm gratitude for love. Impossible that the mistake should be allowed to continue.”

Leopold’s eyes grew dark. “In such a connection,” he said, “it would be better not to mention the word ‘mistake.’ I’m glad you are here; for now you can learn from me my intentions toward that lady—”

“Intentions, did you say, your Majesty? I fear I grow hard of hearing.”

“At least you will never grow slow of understanding. I did speak of my intentions toward Miss Mowbray.”

“You would give the lady some magnificent estate, some splendid acknowledgment—”

“Whether splendid or not would be a matter of opinion,” laughed the Emperor. “I shall offer her a present of myself.”

The old man had been sitting with his chin sunk into his short neck, peering out from under his brows in a way he had; but he lifted his head suddenly, with a look in his eyes like that of an animal who scents danger from an unexpected quarter.

“Your Majesty!” he exclaimed. “You are your father’s son, you are Rhaetian, and your standard of honor—”

“I hope to marry Miss Mowbray,” Leopold cut him short.

The Chancellor’s jaw dropped, and he grew pale. “I had dreamed of nothing as bad as this,” he blurted out, with no thought or wish to sugar the truth. “I feared a young man’s rashness. I dreaded scandal. But, forgive me, your Majesty, for you a morganatic marriage would be madness—”

“A morganatic marriage I did think of at first. But on second thoughts I saw it would be ungrateful.”

“Ah yes, to the country which expects so much of you.”

“No, to the woman who has the right to all or nothing. I will make her Empress of Rhaetia.”

With a cry the Chancellor sprang up. His eyes glared like the eyes of a bull who receives the death stroke. His working lips, and the hollow sound in his throat alarmed the Emperor.

“No, your Majesty. No!” he panted.

“But I say yes,” Leopold answered, “and let no man give me nay. I’ve thought it all out. I will make her a Countess first. Then, she shall be made my Empress.”

“Your Majesty, it is not possible.”

“Take care, Chancellor.”

“She has been deceiving you. She has neither the birth, the position, nor the name she claims to have, and I can prove it.”

“You are mad, von Breitstein,” the Emperor flung at him. “That can be your only excuse for such words.”

“I am not mad, but I am old and wise, your Majesty. To-day you have made me feel that I am very old. Punish me as you will for my frankness. My work for you and yours is nearly done. Cheerfully will I submit to my dismissal if only this last effort in your service may save the ship of state from wreck. I would not make an accusation which I could not prove. And I can prove that the two English ladies who have been staying at Schloss Lyndalberg are not the persons they pretend to be.”

“Who has been lying to you?” cried Leopold, who held between clenched hands the temper he vowed not to lose with this old man.

“To me, no one. To your Majesty, to society in Kronburg, two adventuresses have lied.”

The Emperor caught his breath. “If you were a young man I would kill you for that,” he said.

“I know you would. As it is, my life is yours. But before you take it, for God’s sake, for your father’s sake, hear me out.”

Leopold did not speak for a moment, but stared at the vanishing landscape, which he saw through a red haze. “Very well,” he said at last, “I will hear you, because I fear nothing you can say.”

“When I heard of your Majesty’s—admiration for a certain lady,” the Chancellor began quickly, lest the Emperor should change his mind, “I looked for her name and her mother’s in Burke’s Peerage. There I found Lady Mowbray, widow of a dead Baron of that ilk; mother of a son, still a child, and of one daughter, a young woman with many names and twenty-eight years.

“This surprised me, as the Miss Mowbray I had seen at the birthday ball looked no more than eighteen, and—I was told—confessed to twenty. The Mowbrays, I learned by a little further research in Burke, were distantly connected by marriage with the family of Baumenburg-Drippe. This seemed an odd coincidence, in the circumstances. But acting as duty bade me act, I wired to two persons: Baron von Sark, your Majesty’s ambassador to Great Britain; and the Crown Prince of Hungaria, the brother of Princess Virginia.”

“What did you telegraph?” asked the Emperor, icily.

“Nothing compromising to your Majesty, you may well believe. I inquired of Adalbert if he had English relations, a Lady Mowbray and daughter Helen, traveling in Rhaetia; and I begged that, if so, he would describe their appearance by telegram. To von Sark I said that particulars by wire concerning the widow of Lord Mowbray and daughter Helen, would put me under personal obligation. Both these messages I sent off night before last. Yesterday I received Adalbert’s answer; this morning, von Sark’s. They are here,” and the Chancellor tapped the breast of his gray coat. “Will your Majesty read them?”

“If you wish,” replied Leopold at his haughtiest and coldest.

The old man unbuttoned his coat and produced a coroneted pocket-book, a souvenir of friendship on his last birthday from the Emperor. Leopold saw it, and

remembered, as the Chancellor hoped he would.

“Here are the telegrams, your Majesty,” he said. “The first one is from the Crown Prince of Hungaria.”

“Have no idea where Lady Mowbray and daughter are traveling; may be Rhaetia or North Pole,” Adalbert had written with characteristic flippancy. “Have seen neither for eight years, and scarcely know them. But Lady M. tall brown old party with nose like hobbyhorse. Helen dark, nose like mother’s, wears glasses.”

With no betrayal of feeling, Leopold laid the telegram on the red plush seat, and unfolded the other.

“Pardon delay,” the Rhaetian ambassador’s message began. “Have been making inquiries. Lady Mowbray has been widow for ten years. Not rich. During son’s minority has let her town and country houses, lives much abroad. Very high church, intellectual, at present in Calcutta, where her daughter Helen, twenty-eight, not pretty, is lately engaged to marry middle-aged Judge of some distinction.”

“So!” And the Emperor threw aside the second bit of paper. “It is on such slight grounds as these that a man of the world can label two ladies ‘adventuresses’!”

The Chancellor was bitterly disappointed. He had counted on the impression which these telegrams must make, and unless Leopold were acting, it was now certain that love had driven him out of his senses.

But if the Emperor were mad, he must be treated accordingly, and the old statesman condescended to “bluff.”

“There is still more to tell,” he said, “if your Majesty has not heard enough. But I think when you have reflected you will not wish for more. It is clear that the women calling themselves Mowbrays have had the audacity to present themselves here under false colors. They have either deceived Lady Lambert, who introduced them to Rhaetian society, or—still more likely—they have cleverly forged their letters of introduction.”

“Why didn’t you telegraph to Lady Lambert, while your hand was in?” sneered Leopold.

“I did, your Majesty, or rather, not knowing her present address I wired a friend of mine, an acquaintance of hers, begging him to make inquiries, without using

my name. But I have not yet received an answer to that telegram."

"Until you do, I should think that even a cynic like yourself might give two defenseless, inoffensive ladies the benefit of the doubt."

"Inoffensive?" echoed von Breitstein. "Inoffensive, when they came to this country to ensnare your Majesty through the girl's beauty? But, great Heaven, it is true that I am growing old! I have forgotten to ask your Majesty whether you have gone so far as to mention the word marriage to Miss Mowbray?"

"I'll answer that question by another. Do you really believe that Miss Mowbray came to Rhaetia to 'entrap' me?"

"I do. Though I scarcely think that even her ambition flew as high as you are encouraging it to soar."

"In case you're right she would have been overjoyed with an offer of morganatic marriage."

"Overjoyed is a poor word. Overwhelmed might be nearer."

"Yet I tell you she refused me last night, and is leaving Rhaetia to-day rather than listen to further entreaties."

Leopold bent forward to launch this thunderbolt, his brown hands on his knees, his eyes eager. The memories, half bitter, half sweet, called up by his own words, caused Virginia to appear more beautiful, more desirable even than before.

He was delighted with the expression of the Chancellor's face. "Now, what arguments have you left?" he broke out in the brief silence.

"All I had before—and many new ones. For what your Majesty has said shows the lady more ambitious, more astute, therefore more dangerous than I had guessed. She staked everything on the power of her charms. And she might have won, had you not an old servant who wouldn't be fooled by the witcheries of a fair Helen."

"She has won," said Leopold. Then, quickly, "God forgive me for chiming in with your bitter humor, as if she'd played a game. By simply being herself, she has won me—such as I am. She's proved that if she cares at all, it's for the man, and not the Emperor, since she called the offer you think so magnificent, an insult. Yes, Chancellor, that was the word she used; and it was almost the last she

said to me: which is the reason I'm traveling to-day. And none of your boasted 'proofs' can hold me back."

"By Heaven, your Majesty must look upon yourself from the point of view you credit to the girl. You forget the Emperor in the man."

"The two need not be separated."

"Love indeed makes men blind, and spares not the eyes of Emperors."

"I've pledged myself to bear with you, Chancellor."

"And I know you'll keep your word. I must speak, for Rhaetia, and your better self. You are following this—lady to give her your Empire for a toy."

"She must first accept the Emperor as her husband."

"A lady who has so poor a name of her own that she steals one which doesn't belong to her. The nation won't bear it."

"You speak for yourself, not for Rhaetia," said Leopold. "Though I'm not so old as you by half your years, I believe I can judge my people better than you do. The law which bids an Emperor of Rhaetia match with Royalty is an unwritten law, a law solely of customs, handed down through the generations. I'll not spoil my life by submitting to its yoke, since by breaking it the nation gains, as I do. I could go to the world's end and not find a woman as worthy to be my wife and Empress of Rhaetia as Helen Mowbray."

"You have never seen Princess Virginia."

"I've no wish to see her. There's but one woman for me, and I swear to you, if I lose her, I'll go to my grave unmarried. Let the crown fall to my uncle's son. I'll not perjure myself even for Rhaetia."

The Chancellor bowed his head and held up his hands, for by that gesture alone could he express his despair.

"If my people love me, they'll love my wife, and rejoice in my happiness," Leopold went on, sharply. "If they complain, why, we shall see who's master; whether or not the Emperor of Rhaetia is a mere figurehead. In some countries Royalty is but an ornamental survival of a picturesque past, a King or Queen is a mere puppet which the nation loads with luxury to do itself honor. That's not true of Rhaetia, though, as I'm ready to prove, if prove it I must. But I believe I

shall be spared the trouble. We Rhaetians love romance; you are perhaps the one exception. While as for the story you've told me, I would not give that for it!" And the Emperor snapped his fingers.

"You still believe the ladies have a right to the name of Mowbray?"

"I believe that they are of stainless reputation, and that any seeming mystery can be explained. Miss Mowbray is herself. That's enough for me. Perhaps, Chancellor, there are two Lady Mowbrays."

"Only one is mentioned in Burke."

"Burke isn't gospel."

"Pardon me. It's the gospel of the British peerage. It can no more be guilty of error than Euclid."

"Nor can Miss Mowbray be guilty of wrong. I should still stake my life on that, even had your conclusions not been lame ones."

The old man accepted this rebuff in silence. But it was not the silence of absolute hopelessness. It was only such a pause as a prize-fighter makes between rounds.

"Your Majesty will not be in too great haste, at all events, I trust," he said at last. "At least a little reflection, a little patience, to cool the blood. I have not laid down all my cards yet."

"It's often bad policy not to lead trumps," replied Leopold.

"Often, but not always. Time, and the end of the play will show. Is your Majesty's indulgence for the old man quite exhausted?"

"Not quite, though rather strained, I confess." Leopold tempered his words with a faint smile.

"Then I have one more important question to ask, venturing to remind you first that I have acted solely in your interest. If such a step as you contemplate should be my death blow, it is because of my love for you, and Rhaetia. Tell me, your Majesty, this one thing. If it were proved to you that the lady you know as Miss Mowbray, was, not only not the person she pretends to be, but in all other respects unworthy of your love—what would you do?"

"You speak of impossibilities."

“But if they were not impossibilities?”

“In such a case I should do as other men do—spend the rest of life in trying to forget a lost ideal.”

“I thank your Majesty. That is all I ask. I suppose you will continue your journey?”

“Yes, as far as Felgarde, where I hope to find Lady Mowbray and her daughter.”

“Then, your Majesty, when I’ve expressed my gratitude for your forebearance—even though I’ve failed to be convincing—I’ll trouble you no longer.”

The Chancellor rose, painfully, with a reminiscence of gout, and Leopold stared at him in surprise. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“Only that, as I can do no further good here, with your permission, I will get out at the station we are coming into, and go back home again.”

The Emperor realized, what he had not noticed until this moment, that the train was slackening speed as it approached the suburbs of a town. His conversation with the Chancellor had lasted for an hour, and he was far from regretting the prospect of being left in peace. More than once he had come perilously near to losing his temper, forgetting his gratitude and the old man’s years. How much longer he could have held out under a continued strain of provocation, he did not know; so he spoke no word of dissuasion when Count von Breitstein picked up his soft hat and buttoned the gray coat for departure.

“I’ve passed pleasanter hours in your society, I admit,” said Leopold, when the train stopped. “But I can thank you for your motives, if not your maxims; and here’s my hand.”

“It would be most kind of your Majesty to telephone me from Felgarde,” the Chancellor exclaimed, as if on a sudden thought, while they shook hands, “merely to say whether you remain there; or whether you go further; or whether you return at once. I am too fatigued to travel back immediately to Schloss Breitstein, and shall rest for some hours at least, in my house at Kronburg, so a call will find me there.”

“I will do as you ask,” said the Emperor. Again he pressed the Chancellor’s hand, and it was very cold.

CHAPTER XV

THROUGH THE TELEPHONE

When Leopold arrived at Felgarde he went immediately to the hotel which he had designated as a place of meeting. But no ladies answering to the description he gave had been seen there. Either Miss Mowbray had failed to receive his message, or, having received, had chosen to ignore it.

The doubt, harrowing while it lasted, was solved on returning to the railway station, though certainty proved scarcely less tantalizing than uncertainty had been.

The telegram was still in the hands of the station-master, to whose care it had been addressed. This diligent person professed to have sent a man through the Orient Express, from end to end, calling for Miss Helen Mowbray, but calling in vain. He had no theory more plausible to offer than that the lady had not started from Kronburg; or else that she had left the train at Felgarde before her name had been cried. But certainly she would not have had time to go far, if she were a through passenger, for the Orient Express stopped but ten minutes at Felgarde.

It was evident throughout the short conversation that the excellent official was on pins and needles. Struck by the Emperor’s features, which he had so often seen in painting and photograph, it still seemed impossible that the greatest man in Rhaetia could be traveling thus about the country, in ordinary morning dress, and unattended. Sure at one instant that he must be talking with the Emperor, sure the next that he had been deceived by a likeness, the poor fellow struggled against his confusion in a way that would have amused Leopold, in a different mood.

With a manner that essayed the difficult mean between reverence due to Royalty, and common, every-day politeness, good enough for an ordinary gentleman, the station-master volunteered to ascertain whether the ladies described had gone out and given up their tickets. A few minutes of suspense dragged on; then came the news that no such persons had passed.

Here was a stumbling-block. Since Helen Mowbray and her mother had apparently not traveled by the Orient Express, where had they gone on leaving the hotel at Kronburg? Had they after all misled Baroness von Lyndal as to their intentions, for the purpose of blinding the Emperor; or had they simply changed

their minds at the last minute, as women may? Could it be possible that they had changed them so completely as to return to Schloss Lyndalberg? Or had they chosen to vanish mysteriously through some back door out of Rhaetia, leaving no trace which even a lover could find?

Leopold could not help recalling the Chancellor's "revelations," but dismissed them as soon as they had crept into his brain. No matter where the clue to the tangle might lie, he told himself that it was not in any act of which Helen Mowbray need be ashamed.

He could think of nothing more to do but to go dismally back to Kronburg, and await developments—or rather, to stir them up by every means in his power. This was the course he finally chose; and, just as he was about to act upon his decision, he remembered his carelessly given promise to Count von Breitstein.

There was a telephone in the railway station at Felgarde, and Leopold himself called up the Chancellor at Kronburg.

"My friends are not here. I'm starting for Kronburg as soon as possible, either by the next train, or by special," he announced, after a far-away squeak had signified Count von Breitstein's presence at the other end. "I don't see why you wish to know, but I would not break my promise. That's all; good-by—Eh?—What was that you said?"

"I have a—curious—piece of—news for you," came over the wire in the Chancellor's voice. "It's—about the—ladies."

"What is it?" asked Leopold.

"I hinted that I had more information which I could not give you then. But I am in a different position now. You did not find your friends in the Orient Express."

"No," said the Emperor.

"They gave out that they were leaving Rhaetia. But they haven't crossed the frontier."

"Thanks. That's exactly what I wanted to know."

"You remember a certain person whose name can't be mentioned over the telephone, buying a hunting lodge near the village of Inseleden, in the Buchenwald, last year?"

“Yes. I remember very well. But what has that to do with my friends?”

“The younger lady has gone there without her mother, who remains in Kronburg, with the companion. It seems that the present owner of the hunting lodge has been acquainted with them for some time, though he was ignorant of their masquerade. You see, he knows them only under their real name. The young lady is a singer in comic operas, a Miss Jenny Brett, whose *dossier* can be given you on demand. The owner of the hunting lodge arrived at his place this morning, motored into Kronburg, where the young lady had waited, evidently informed of his coming. She invited him to pay her a visit at her hotel; he accepted, and returned the invitation, which she accepted.”

“You are misinformed. The lady was never an opera singer. And I’m certain she would neither receive the person you mention, nor go to visit him.”

“Will you drive out to the lodge to-night, when you reach Kronburg, and honor the gentleman with an unexpected call?”

“I will, d—n you, but not for the reason you think,” cried the Emperor. It was the first time in his life that he had ever used strong language to the Chancellor.

He dropped the receiver, flung down a gold coin with his own head upon it (at the moment he could have wished that he had no other) and waving away an offer of change, rushed out of the office.

Under his breath he swore again, the strongest oaths which the rich language of his fatherland provided, anathematizing not the beloved woman, maligned, but the man who maligned her.

There would be death in the thought that she could be false to herself, and her confession of love for him; but then, it was unthinkable. Let the whole world reek with foulness; his love must still shine above it, white and remote as the young moon.

This old man—whose life would scarce have been safe if, in his Emperor’s present mood, the two had been together—this old man had a grudge against the one perfect girl on earth. There was no black rag of scandal he would not stoop to pick out of the mud and fly as a flag of battle, soothing his conscience—if he had one—by saying it was for “Rhaetia’s good.”

Telling himself that these things were truths, Leopold hurried away to inquire for the next train back to Kronburg. There would not be another for three hours, he

found, and as nothing could have induced him to wait three hours, or even two, he ordered a special. There was a raging tiger in his breast, which would not cease to tear him until he had seen Helen Mowbray, laid his Empire at her feet, received her answer, and through it, punished the Chancellor.

The special, he was told, could be ready in less than an hour. The journey to Kronburg would occupy nearly three more, and it would be close upon nine before he could start with Count von Breitstein, for the hunting lodge which he had promised to visit. But the Chancellor would doubtless have his electric carriage ready for the desired expedition, and they could reach their destination in twenty minutes. This was not too long a time to give up to proving the old man wrong; for to do this, not to find Helen Mowbray, was Leopold's motive in consenting. She would not be there, and the Emperor was going because she would not. He wanted to witness von Breitstein's confusion, for humiliation was the bitterest punishment which could possibly be inflicted on the proud and opinionated old man.

CHAPTER XVI

TRUTH ACCORDING TO THE CHANCELLOR

“

Tell the truth—when desirable; spice with prevarication—when necessary; and never part with the whole truth at one time, since waste is sinful,” was one of the maxims by which the Chancellor guided his own actions, though he did not give it away for the benefit of others; and he had made the most of that prudent policy to-day.

He had told his Emperor no lies, even through the telephone, where forgetfulness may be pardonable; but he had arranged his truths as skilfully as he arranged his pawns on a chess-board.

It was said by some who pretended to know, that Count von Breitstein had had a Jesuit for a tutor; but be this as it might, it was certain that, when he had a goal to reach, he did not pick his footsteps by the way. A flower here or there was apt to be trodden down, a small life broken, a reputation stained; but what of that when Rhaetia’s standard was to be planted upon the mountain top?

Supposing he had said to the Emperor, after his promise of plain speaking: “Your Majesty’s journey to-day is a wild goose chase. I happen to know that those you seek are still at their hotel in Kronburg. When I heard from my brother Egon that they were leaving Schloss Lyndalberg suddenly and secretly, I went immediately to Kronburg, and called upon the ladies. My intention was to frighten them away, by telling them that the fraud was found out, and they had better disappear decently of their own accord, unless they wished to be assisted over the frontier. They actually dared refuse to see me, alleging as an excuse the sudden illness of their companion, which had prevented their leaving Kronburg as they intended. While I was awaiting this answer, I learned that some person was telegraphing from the railway station to the hotel manager, inquiring if the Mowbrays had gone. I guessed this person to be your Majesty, and ventured to use my influence strongly with the manager, so successfully that I was permitted to dictate the reply, and obtain his promise that the matter should be strictly confidential. I judged that your Majesty had meant to take the Orient Express, but had missed it; and as you telephoned from the station I had no doubt that you intended to

follow, either by the next train or by a special. Soon, I learned that no special had been ordered by any one. I ascertained the time of the next train, and sought your Majesty in it. Had my eloquence then prevailed with you, I should have urged your return with me, and thus you would have been spared the useless journey to Felgarde. As you remained obstinately faithful, however, I considered myself fortunate to have you out of the way, so that I could hurry back, and, unhampered by your suspicions, set about learning still more facts to Miss Mowbray's discredit, or inventing a few if those which undoubtedly existed could not be unearthed in time."

Supposing that Count von Breitstein's boasted frankness had led him to make these statements, it is probable that Rhaetia would not long have rejoiced in a Chancellor so wise and so self-sacrificing.

It was well enough for the old man to declare his willingness to retire, if his master desired it; but he had counted (as people who risk all for great ends do count) on not being taken at his word. He loved power, because he had always had it, and without power life would not be worth the living; but it was honestly for the country's sake, and for Leopold's sake, rather than his own, that he desired to hold and keep his high position. Without his strong hand to seize the helm, should Leopold's fail for some careless instant, he conscientiously believed that the ship of state would be lost.

He had done his best to disillusion a young man tricked into love for an adventuress. Now, neither as Chancellor nor friend could he make further open protest, unless favored by fate with some striking new development. There were, nevertheless, other ways of working; and he had but taken the first step toward interference. He meant, since worst had come to worst, to go on relentlessly; and he would hardly have considered it criminal to destroy a woman of the type to which he assigned Helen Mowbray, provided no means less stringent sufficed to snatch her from the throne of Rhaetia.

There were many plans seething in the Chancellor's head, and Egon's help might be necessary. He might even have to go so far as to bribe Egon to kidnap the girl and sacrifice himself by marrying her out of hand, before she had a chance to learn that the Emperor was ready to meet her demands. Egon had been attentive to Miss Mowbray; it might well be believed even by the Emperor, that the young man had been madly enough in love to act upon his own initiative, uninfluenced by his brother.

The Chancellor’s first act on parting with Leopold was to telegraph Captain von Breitstein to meet the train by which he would return to Kronburg; therefore on arriving at the station he was not surprised to see Egon’s handsome face prominent among others less attractive, on the crowded platform.

“Well?” questioned the young man as the old man descended.

“I’m sorry to say it is very far from well. But between us, we shall, I hope, improve matters. You have kept yourself *au courant* with everything that has happened in the camp of the enemy?”

“Yes.”

“Is anything stirring?”

“Say ‘any one,’ and I can answer you more easily. Who do you think has arrived at the hotel?”

“The devil, probably, to complicate matters.”

“I’ve heard him called so; but a good-looking devil, and devilishly pleasant. I met him in his motor, in which he’d driven into town from his new toy, the hunting lodge in—”

“What! You mean the Prince—”

“Of Darkness, you’ve just named him.” Egon gave a laugh at his own repartee, but the Chancellor heard neither. His hard face brightened. “That’s well,” said he grimly. “Here we have just the young man to see us through this bad pass, if he’s as good looking as ever, and in his usual mood for mischief. If we can interest him in this affair, he may save me a great deal of trouble, and you a mésalliance.”

“But your wedding present to me—” began Egon, blankly.

“Don’t distress yourself. Do what you can to assist me, and whatever the end, you shall be my heir, I promise you. Is the Prince at the hotel now?”

“Yes. He had been to call on you at your town house, he stopped his automobile to tell me; and hearing from me that you would be back this evening, he decided to stay all night at the hotel, so that he could have a chat with you after your return, no matter at what hour it might be. I believe he has left a note at your house.”

“I will go to him, and we can then discuss its contents together,” said Count von Breitstein. And the chauffeur who drove his electric carriage was told to go to the Hohenlangenwald Hotel.

The Prince who would, the Chancellor hoped, become the *Deus ex machina*, was engaged in selecting the wines for his dinner, when Count von Breitstein’s card was sent in. He was pleased to say that he would receive his visitor, and (Egon having been sent about his business) the Chancellor was shown into the purple drawing-room of the suite reserved for Royalty.

As he entered, a young man jumped up from an easy chair, scattering sheaves of illustrated papers, and held out both his hands, with a “Welcome, my dear old friend!”

It would have been vain to scour the world in quest of a handsomer young man than this one. Even Egon von Breitstein would have seemed a more good-looking puppet beside him, and the Chancellor rejoiced in the physical perfection of a Prince who might prove a dangerous rival for an absent Emperor.

“This is the best of good fortune!” exclaimed Count von Breitstein. “Egon told me you were here, and without waiting to get the note he said you had left for me, I came to you, straight from the railway station.”

“Splendid! And now you must dine with me. It was that I asked of you in my note. Dinner early; a serious talk; and an antidote for solemnity in a visit to the Leopoldhalle to see Mademoiselle Felice from the *Folies Bergère* do her famous Fire and Fountain dance. A box; curtains half drawn; no one need know that the Chancellor helps his young friend amuse himself.”

“I thank your Royal Highness for the honor you suggest, and nothing could give me greater pleasure, if I had not a suggestion to venture in place of yours, which I believe may suit you better. I think I know of what you wish to talk with me, and I desire the same, while the business I have most at heart—”

“Ah, your business is my business, then?”

“I hope you may so consider it. In any case it is business which must be carried through now or never, and is of life and death importance to those whom it concerns. How it’s to be done, or whether done at all, may depend on you, if you consent to interest yourself; and it could not be in more competent hands. If I’d been given my choice of an assistant, out of the whole world, I should have

chosen your Royal Highness."

"This sounds like an adventure."

"It may be an adventure, and at the same time an act of justice."

"Good. Although it was not in search of an adventure that I came to you, any more than it was the hope of game which brought me on a sudden impulse to my little hunting lodge, still, I trust I have always the instinct of a sportsman."

"I am sure of that; and I have the less hesitation in enlisting your good-will, because it happens that your bird and mine can be killed with one shot."

"Chancellor, you excite my curiosity."

The old man smiled genially; but under the bristling brows glowed a flame as of the last embers in a dying fire. "Up-stairs," said he, "is a pretty woman; a beauty. She claims the name of Helen Mowbray, though her right to it is more than disputable. Her love affairs threaten a public scandal."

"Ah, you are not the first one who has spoken of this pretty lady since I crossed the frontier this morning," exclaimed the young man, flushing. He paused and bit his lip, before going on, as if he wished to think, or regain self-control. But at last he laughed, not altogether lightly. "So, the lady most talked about for the moment in all Rhaetia, is under the same roof with me."

"Fortunately, she is close at hand," said the Chancellor. "To you, more than to any other, I can open my heart in speaking of our great peril. This girl has drawn the Emperor into a fit of moon-madness. It is no more serious than that, and were she out of the way, he would wake as from a dream. But this is the moment of the crisis. He must be saved now, or he is lost forever, and all our hopes with him. Blessed would be the man who brought my poor master to his senses. I have tried and failed. But you could do it."

"I?"

"The sword of justice is ready for your hand."

"That sentence has a solemn ring. I don't see what you want me to do. But—what sort of woman is this who has bewitched your grave Leopold?"

"Beautiful, and clever, as women are clever; but not clever enough to fight her battle out against you and me."

The Prince laughed again. “It isn’t my *métier* to fight with women. I prefer to make love to them.”

“Ah, you have said it! That is what I beg your Royal Highness to do.”

“How am I to get at her, when Leopold stands guard—”

“He will not be on guard for some hours.”

“Ha, ha! You mean me to understand that there’s no time to waste.”

“Not a moment.”

“What is the girl like?”

“Tall and slender, pink and white as a flower, dark-lashed and yellow-haired, like an Austrian beauty. Eyes gray or violet, it would be hard to say which, for a man of my years; but even I can assure you that when the lady looks down, then suddenly up again, under those dark lashes, it’s something to quicken the pulse of any man under sixty.”

“It would quicken mine only to hear your description, if you hadn’t just put a maggot in my head that tickles me to laughter instead of raptures,” said the Prince. “Tell me this; has this girl a tiny black mole just over the left eyebrow—very fetching;—and when she smiles, does her mouth point upward a bit on the right side, like a fairy sign-post showing the way to a small round scar, almost as good as a dimple?”

The Chancellor reflected for a few seconds, and then replied that, unless his eyesight and his memory had deceived him, both these marks were to be met with on Miss Mowbray’s face. He did not add that he had seen her but once, and at the time had not taken interest enough to note details; for it was plain that the Prince had a theory as to the lady’s real identity; and to establish it as a fact might be valuable.

“Is it possible that you’ve already met this dangerous young person?” he asked eagerly.

“Well, I begin to believe it may be so. I’ll explain why later; thereby hangs a confession. At all events, a certain lady exactly answering the description you’ve given, is very likely in this neighborhood; I’ve heard that she was shortly due in Kronburg, and it was in my mind when deciding suddenly to spend a few days in

the woods for the sake of seeing you, that I might see her also before I went home again. As a matter of fact, the lady and I have had a misunderstanding, at a rather unfortunate moment, as I'd just imprudently taken her into my confidence concerning—er—some family affairs. If it is she who is masquerading in Rhaetia as Miss Mowbray, and turning your Emperor's head, it may be that she's trying to revenge herself on me. She's pretty enough to beguile St. Anthony, let alone a St. Leopold; and she's clever enough to have thought out such a scheme. Our small quarrel happened about four weeks ago, and I've lost sight of the lady since; she disappeared, expecting probably to be followed; but she wasn't. The only question is, if she's playing Miss Mowbray, where did she get the mother? I've heard there *is* a Mowbray-mother?"

"There's a faded Dresden china shepherdess that answers to the name," said the Chancellor, dryly. "But these mantelpiece ornaments are easily manufactured."

The Prince was amused. "No, she wouldn't stick at a mother, if she wanted one," he chuckled. "And while she was about it, she has apparently annexed a whole family tree. The black mole, and the scar-dimple, you're sure of them, Chancellor? Because, if you are—"

"Oh, I am practically certain!"

"Then, the more pieces in the puzzle which I fit together, the more likely does it seem that your Leopold's Miss Helen Mowbray and my Miss Jenny Brett are one and the same."

"Miss Jenny Brett?"

"Did you never hear the name?"

"If I have, I've forgotten it."

"Chancellor, you wouldn't if you were a few years younger. Jenny Brett is the prettiest if not the most talented singer ever sent out from Australia, the fashionable home of singers. She is billed to sing at the Court Theater of Kronburg in a fortnight, her first engagement in Rhaetia."

"You are right. It may well be that she's been having a game with us—a game that we can prevent now, thank Heaven, from ending in earnest."

"Oh, yes, we can prevent that."

“Your Royal Highness met the lady in your own country?”

“N-o. It was in Paris at first, but I’m afraid I induced her to accept an engagement at home. We were great friends for a while, and really she’s a charming creature. I can’t blame myself. Who would have guessed that she’d turn out so ambitious? By Jove, I can sympathize with Leopold. The girl tried to twist me round her finger, and I verily believe fancied at one time that I would offer her marriage.”

“It must be the same girl. And the Emperor *has* offered her marriage.”

“What? Impossible! But—with the left hand, of course, though even that would be unheard of for a man in his—”

“I swear to your Royal Highness that if he isn’t stopped, he will force her on the Rhaetian people as Empress.”

“Gad! Little Jenny Brett! I didn’t half appreciate her brilliant qualities.”

“Yet I would wager that she appreciated yours.”

The Prince shrugged his shoulders. “I believe she really cared something for me—a month ago.”

“Then she still cares. You are not a man whom a woman can forget, though pique or ambition may lead her to try. I tell you, frankly, I believe that Providence sent your Royal Highness here at this moment, and my best hopes are now pinned on you. You—and no one as well as you—can save the Emperor for a nobler fate. Even when I supposed you a stranger to this lady who calls herself Helen Mowbray, I thought that, if you would consent to meet her and exercise your fascinations, there might be hope of averting the danger from my master. Now, I hope everything. I beg, I entreat, that your Royal Highness will send up your name and ask the lady to see you without delay. She will certainly receive you; and when the Emperor learns that she has done so, it may go far to disillusion him, for—pardon me—your Royal Highness has a great reputation as a lady-killer. Still more valuable would it be, however—indeed, he would be cured of his infatuation forever, if—if—”

“If what?” inquired the young man, tired of the Chancellor’s long windedness and beating about the bush.

“If you could persuade her to go out to your hunting lodge. Then Leopold and

Rhaetia would be saved—by you. What could be better, what could be more suitable?”

“What indeed?” echoed the Prince. “For every one concerned,—except for Jenny Brett.”

“Considering the havoc she has worked among us all, need she be considered—before the interests of a great country, and—perhaps I may hint—an innocent and lovely Royal lady, whom this girl is doing her best to humiliate?”

“I’m hanged if she need be so considered! Anyhow, I’ll do what you ask. I’ll send up my card, and then—we’ll see what happens.”

The Prince took from his pocket a small gold case, sparkling with jewels—a trifle which advertised itself as the gift of a woman. Out of this came a card, with a crown over the name in the fashion of his country and some others. An equerry, waiting in an adjoining room, was summoned; the card given to him; passed on to a hotel servant; and then, for five minutes, ten minutes, the old man and the young one waited, talking of a subject very near to both their hearts.

At last, when they had no more to say, word came that Lady Mowbray and Miss Mowbray would see his Royal Highness.

“The value of a well regulated mother!” laughed the young man, who had not troubled to inquire for Lady Mowbray. “Well, whatever comes of this interview, Chancellor, I shall presently have something to tell you.”

“The suspense will be hard to bear,” said Count von Breitstein, “but I have perfect faith in you. We understand each other completely now; but—I’m growing old, and the past few days have tried me sorely. Remember, I pray you, all that’s at stake, and do not hesitate for an instant. Have no false scruple with such a person as this. The Emperor will soon arrive in Kronburg. He’ll lose no time in trying to find the girl, and, once they’ve had another meeting, all our plans, all our precautions, may be in vain. He searches for her, to offer his crown.”

The Prince listened, and did not smile as he went out.

He had bidden the Chancellor await his return in the salon of the Royal suite, which was always kept at his disposal, when he appeared in the neighborhood, as he often did since purchasing the hunting lodge a few miles out of Kronburg, in the forest.

Other foreign royalties, or lesser princes from the provinces, occasionally occupied the apartments, also; and this handsome Royal Highness of to-day was not the only one whom the Chancellor of Rhaetia had visited there. He knew by heart the rich purple hangings in the salon, with the double wolf-head of Rhaetia stamped in gold at regular intervals on the velvet; and he sickened of their splendor now, as the moments dragged, and he remained alone.

When half an hour had passed, he could no longer sit still on the purple velvet sofa, but began walking up and down, his hands behind him, scowling at the full length, oil-painted portraits of Rhaetia's dead rulers; glaring a question into his own eyes in the long, gold framed mirrors,—a question he would have given his life to hear answered in the way he wished.

Three quarters of an hour had gone at last, and still the Chancellor paced the purple drawing-room, and still the Prince did not come back to tell the news.

Had the young man failed? Had that Siren up-stairs beguiled him, as she had beguiled one stronger and greater than he? Was it possible that she had lured the whole secret of their scheme from the Prince, and then induced him to leave the hotel while her arch enemy fumed in the salon, awaiting his return?

But no, there were quick footsteps outside the door; the handle was turned. At least, his Royal Highness was not a traitor.

As the Chancellor had confessed, he was growing old. He felt suddenly very weak; his lips fell apart, trembling; yet he would not utter the words that hung upon them.

Fortunately the Prince read the appeal in the glittering eyes, and did not wait to be questioned.

"Well, I've seen the lady and had a talk with her," he said, in a voice which was, the old man felt, somehow different in tone from what it had been an hour ago.

"And is she the person you have known?"

"Yes, she's a person I have known. It's—it's all right about that plan of yours, Chancellor. She's going with me to the lodge."

"Heaven be praised! It seems almost too good to be true. When does she go?"

"At once. That is, as soon as she can get ready. She will dine with me, and my

equerry will stop behind and eat the dinner I had ordered here."

"Magnificent. Then she will go with you alone? Nothing could be better. The presence of the alleged mother as chaperon would be a drawback."

"Oh, no chaperon is needed for us two. The—er—mother remains at the hotel with a la—a companion they have, who is ill. It was—er—somewhat difficult to arrange this matter, but I don't think the plot I have in mind now will fail, provided you carry through your part as smartly as I have mine."

"You may depend upon me. Your Royal Highness is marvelous. Am I to understand that the lady goes with you quite of her own free will?"

"Quite. I flatter myself that she's rather pleased with the invitation. In a few minutes, I and the fair damsel will be spinning away for a drive in my red motor; you know, the one which I always leave at the lodge, to be ready for use whenever I choose to pay a flying visit. I shall keep her out until it's dark, to give you plenty of time, but before starting I'll telephone to my *chef* that, after all, I sha'n't be away, and he must prepare dinner for two."

"I also will send a telephone message," said the Chancellor.

"To Leopold?"

"Yes, your Royal Highness. This time there will be no uncertainty in my words to him. They will strike home, and, even if he should not be intending to come to Kronburg to-night, they will bring him."

"You are sure you know where to catch the Emperor?"

"He'll telephone me from Felgarde, when he has found those he sought are not there, as he will; and I must be at my house to receive and answer his message. It will soon be time now."

"Very well, all that seems to arrange itself satisfactorily," said the Prince. "Our motor drive can be stretched out for an hour and a half. The lady will then need to dress. Dinner can be kept back till half past eight, if it would suit your book to break in upon us, at the table. My dining-room isn't very grand, but it has plenty of light and color, and wouldn't make a bad background for the last act of this little drama. What do you say, Chancellor? I've always thought that your success as a stage manager of the Theater of Nations was partially due to your eye for dramatic effects."

“Such effects are not to be despised, considering the audience we cater for in that theater.”

“Well, I promise you that for our little amateur play to-night, in my private theater, the footlights shall be lit, the stage set, and two of the principal puppets dressed and painted for the show, before nine. I suppose you can introduce the leading man by that time or a little later?”

The bristling brows drew together involuntarily. Count von Breitstein was working without scruple against the Emperor, for the Emperor’s good; yet he winced at his accomplice’s light jest, and it was by an effort that he kept a note of disapproval out of his voice.

“Unless I much mistake, his Majesty will order a special train, as soon as he has had my message,” said he. “That and everything else falling as I confidently expect, I shall be able to bring him out to your Royal Highness’s hunting lodge a little after nine.”

“You’ll find us at the third course,” prophesied the Prince.

“Naturally, the Emperor’s appearance will startle your visitor,” went on the Chancellor, keenly watching the young man’s extraordinarily handsome face. “She would not dare take the risk and drive out with you, great as the temptation would no doubt be, did she dream that he would learn of the escapade, and follow. Indeed, your Royal Highness must have found subtile weapons ready to your hand, that you so soon broke through the armor of her prudence. I expected much from your magnetism and resourceful wit, yet I hardly dared hope for such speedy, such unqualified success as this which now seems assured to us.”

“My weapons were sharpened on my past acquaintance with the pretty lady,” explained the Prince. “Otherwise the result might have been postponed for as many days as I have delayed moments, though at last, the end might have been the same.”

“Not for Rhaetia. Every instant counts. Thanks to you, we shall win; for actress as this girl is, she’ll find it a task beyond her powers to justify to a jealous man this evening’s tête-a-tête with you.”

“If she tests those powers in our presence, we can be audience and admire her histrionic talents,” said the Prince, pleasantly, though with some faint, growing sign of constraint or perhaps impatience. “There’s no doubt in my mind,

whatever may be the lady’s conception of her part, about the final tableau. And after all, it’s with that alone you concern yourself—eh, Chancellor?”

“It’s that alone,” echoed the old man.

“Then you would like to go and await the message. There’s nothing more for us to arrange. *Au revoir*, Chancellor, till nine.”

“Till nine.”

“When the curtain for the last act will ring up.”

The Prince held out his hand. Count von Breitstein grasped it, and then hurried to his electric carriage which had been waiting outside the hotel. A few minutes later, he was talking over the wire to the Emperor in the railway station at Felgarde.

CHAPTER XVII

THE OLDNESS OF THE CHANCELLOR

Leopold thought it more than possible that, by the time of his return to Kronburg, the Chancellor would be as anxious to wriggle out of his proposal to visit the Prince's hunting lodge, as he had been to have it accepted a few hours before.

"He sha'n't escape his humiliation, though," the Emperor told himself. "He shall go, and he shall beg forgiveness for his suspicions, in sackcloth and ashes. Nothing else can satisfy me now."

Thinking thus, Leopold looked sharply from the window as his special slowed into the central station at Kronburg, along the track which had been kept clear for its arrival. No other train was due at the moment, therefore few persons were on the platform, and a figure in a long gray coat, with its face shadowed by a slouch hat, was conspicuous.

The Emperor had expected to see that figure; but vaguely he wished there were not so much briskness and self-confidence in the set of the massive head and shoulders. The young man believed absolutely in his love; but he would have been gratified to detect a something of depression in the enemy's air, which he might translate as a foreknowledge of failure.

"I hope your Majesty will forgive the liberty I have taken, in coming to the station without a distinct invitation to do so," were the Chancellor's first words as he met the Emperor. "Knowing that you would almost certainly arrive by special train, I came down from my house some time ago, that I might be on hand without fail when you arrived, to place my electric carriage at your service. I thought it probable that you would not have sent to the Palace, and therefore it might save you some slight inconvenience if I were on the spot. If you will honor my poor conveyance—"

"Don't let us delay our business for explanations or compliments, if you please, Chancellor," the Emperor cut him short, brusquely. "I counted on your being here, with your carriage. Now for the hunting lodge in the woods!"

As he spoke, his eyes were on the old man's face, which he hoped to see fall, or change; but there was no visible sign of discomfiture, and von Breitstein made

no attempt to excuse himself from making the proposed visit. Evidently nothing had happened during the hours since the message by telephone, to change the Chancellor's mind.

"Yes, your Majesty," came the prompt response. "Now for the hunting lodge in the woods. I am ready to go with you there—as I always have been, and always shall be ready to serve you when I am needed."

It was on Leopold's tongue to say, that it would be well if his Chancellor's readiness could be confined to those occasions when it was needed; but he shut his lips upon the words, and walked by the old man's side in frozen silence.

The carriage was waiting just outside the station, and the moment the two men were seated, the chauffeur started, noiselessly and swiftly.

Both windows were closed, to keep out the chill of the night air, but soon Leopold impatiently lowered one, forgetting the Chancellor's old-fashioned hatred of draughts, and stared into the night. Already they were approaching the outskirts of the great town, and flying past the dark warehouses and factories of the neighborhood, they sped toward the open country.

The weather, still warm the evening before—that evening of moonlight, not to be forgotten—had turned cold with morning; and to-night there was a pungent scent of dying leaves in the air. It smote Leopold in the face, with the wind of motion, and it seemed to him the essential perfume of sadness. Never again would he inhale that fragrance of the falling year without recalling this hour.

He was half mad with impatience to reach the end of the journey, and confound the Chancellor once for all; yet, as the swift electric carriage spun smoothly along the white road, and landmark after landmark vanished behind tree-branches laced with stars, something within him, would at last have stayed the flying moments, had that been possible. He burned to ask questions of von Breitstein, yet would have died rather than utter them.

It was a relief to the Emperor, when, after a long silence, his companion spoke, —though a relief which carried with it a prick of resentment. Even the Chancellor had no right to speak first, without permission from his sovereign.

"Forgive me, your Majesty," the old man said. "Your anger is hard to bear; yet I bear it uncomplainingly because of my confidence that the reward is not far off. I look for it no further in the future than to-night."

“I, too, believe that you won’t miss your reward!” returned the Emperor sharply.

“I shall have it, I am sure, not only in your Majesty’s forgiveness, but in your thanks.”

“I’ll forgive you when you’ve asked my pardon for your suspicions, and when you’ve found Miss Mowbray for me.”

“I have already found her, and am taking you to her now.”

“Then, you actually believe in your own story? You believe that this sweet and beautiful young girl is a fast actress, a schemer, a friend of your notoriously gallant friend, and willing to risk her reputation by paying a late visit, unchaperoned, to him at his hunting lodge in the woods! You are after all a very poor judge of character, if you dream that we shall see her there.”

“I shall see her, your Majesty. And you will see her, unless the madness you call love has blinded the eyes of your body as well as the eyes of your mind. That she is now at the lodge I know, for the Prince assured me with his own lips that she had promised to motor out alone with him, and dine.”

“You mean, he told you that his friend the actress had promised. I’ll stake my life, even he didn’t dare to say Miss Mowbray.”

“He said Miss Brett, the actress, it’s true. But when he called upon her at her hotel (where he and I met to discuss a matter which is no secret to your Majesty), he asked for Miss Mowbray. And the message that came down, I heard. It was that Miss Mowbray would be delighted to see his Royal Highness. This left no doubt in my mind that, after giving out that she would leave to-day, the lady had remained in Kronburg for the express purpose of meeting her dear friend the Prince, the handsomest and best dressed young man in Europe—after your Majesty, of course. And it was quite natural for her to hope that, as she was supposed to be gone, and you were following her, this evening’s escapade would never be discovered.”

“Please spare me your deductions, Chancellor,” said the Emperor, curtly, “and pray understand now, if you have not understood before, that I am with you in this expedition not to prove you right, but wrong; and nothing you can say will convince me that the Prince’s actress and Miss Mowbray are one. If we find a woman at the hunting lodge, it will not be the lady we seek—unless she has been kidnapped; and as you will presently be obliged to eat every word you’ve

spoken, the fewer such bitter pills you provide for yourself to swallow, the better."

Thus snubbed by the young man whom he had held in his arms, an imperious as well as an Imperial infant, the old statesman sought sanctuary in silence. But he had said that which had been in his mind to say, and he was satisfied. Meekness was not his *métier*, yet he could play the part of the faithful servant, humbly loyal through injustice and misunderstanding; and he played it now, because he knew it to be the one effective rôle. He sat beside the Emperor with bowed head, and stooping shoulders which suggested the weakness of old age, his hands clasped before him; and from time to time he sighed patiently.

As they glided under the dark arch of the Buchenwald, Leopold spoke again.

"You have led me to suppose that our call at the hunting lodge will be a surprise visit to the Prince. That is the case, isn't it?"

Count von Breitstein would have preferred that the question had not been asked. He had intended to convey the impression which the Emperor had received, but he had not clothed it in actual statement. Luckily the Prince was as clever as he was good looking, and he could be trusted as an actor, otherwise the old man would have been still more reluctant to commit himself.

"Were our visit expected, we should not be likely to find the lady," said he. "The Prince and I are on such friendly terms, your Majesty, that he didn't mind confessing he was to have a pretty actress as his guest. He also answered a few questions I asked concerning her, freely and frankly, for to do so he had to tell me only what the world knows. How could he dream that the flirtations or the visits of a Miss Jenny Brett could be of the slightest importance to the Emperor of Rhaetia? Had he guessed, however, that the entertainment he meant to offer her might be interrupted, naturally he would have taken some means to protect her from annoyance."

"This night's work will give him cause to pick a private quarrel with me, if he likes," said the Emperor, convinced of the Chancellor's good faith.

"I don't think he will choose, your Majesty. You are in a mood to be glad if he did, I fear. But no; I need *not* fear. You will always remember Rhaetia, and put her interests before your own wishes."

"You weren't as confident of that a few hours ago."

“Even then I knew that, when the real test should be applied, your Majesty’s cool head would triumph over the hot impulse of youth. But see, we’re passing through the village of Inseleden, fast asleep already; every window dark. In six or seven minutes at this speed, we shall be at the lodge.”

The Emperor laughed shortly. “Add another seven minutes to your first seven, and we shall be out of the lodge again, with Chancellor von Breitstein a sadder and a wiser man than he went in.”

Meekness was once more the part for the old man to play, and raising his hands, palm upwards, in a gesture of generous indulgence for his young sovereign, he denied himself the pleasure of retort.

The hunting lodge in the wood, now the property of the Chancellor’s accommodating young friend, had until recently belonged to a Rhaetian semi-Royal Prince, who had been compelled by lack of sympathy among his creditors to sell something, and had promptly sold the thing he cared for least. The present owner was a keen sportsman, and though he came seldom to the place, had spent a good deal of money in repairing the quaint, rustic house.

Years had passed since the Emperor had done more than pass the lodge gates; and now the outlines of the low rambling structure looked strange to him, silhouetted against a spangled sky. He was glad of this, for he had spent some joyous days here as a boy, and he wished to separate the old impressions and the new.

Two tall chimneys stood up like the pricked ears of some alert, crouching animal. The path to the lodge gleamed white and straight in the darkness as a parting in the rough black hair of a giant. The trees whispered gossip to each other in the wind, and it seemed to Leopold that they were evil things telling lies and slandering his love. He hated them, and their rustling, which once he had loved. He hated the yellow eyes of the animal with the pricked ears, glittering eyes which were lighted windows; he hated the young Prince who owned the place; and he would have hated the Chancellor more than all, had not the old man limped as he walked up the path, showing how heavy was the burden of his years, as he had never shown it to his Emperor before.

The path led to a hooded entrance, and ascending the two stone steps, the Chancellor lifted the mailed glove which did duty as a knocker. Twice he brought it down on the oak panel underneath, and the sound of metal smiting against wood went echoing through the house, with an effect of emptiness and

desolation.

Nobody came to answer the summons, and Leopold smiled in the darkness. He thought it likely that even the Prince was not at home. A practical joke had been played on the Chancellor!

Again the mailed fist struck the panel; an echo alone replied. Count von Breitstein began to be alarmed for the success of his plan. He thanked the night which hid from the keen eyes of the Emperor—cynical now, no doubt—the telltale vein beating hard in his forehead.

“Don’t you think, Chancellor, that after all, you’d better try and take me to some more probable, as well as more suitable, place to look for Miss Mowbray?” he suggested, with a drawl intended to be as aggravating as it actually was. “There doesn’t appear to be any one about. Even the care-takers are out courting, perhaps.”

“But listen, your Majesty,” said von Breitstein, when he knocked again.

Leopold did listen, and heard the ring of a heel on a floor of stone or marble.

CHAPTER XVIII

NOT AT HOME

It was a jäger clad in green who opened the door of the hunting lodge, and gazed, apparently without recognition, at the two men standing in the dark embrasure of the porch.

“We wish to see his Royal Highness, your master,” said the Chancellor, taking the initiative, as he knew the Emperor would wish him to do.

“His Royal Highness is not at home, sir,” replied the jäger.

Leopold’s eyes lightened as he threw a glance of sarcastic meaning at his companion. But Iron Heart was undaunted. He knew very well now, that this was only a prelude to the drama which would follow; and though he had suffered a sharp pang of anxiety at first, he saw that his Royal friend was playing with commendable realism. Naturally, when beautiful young actresses ventured into the forest unchaperoned, to dine with fascinating princes, the least that such favored gentlemen could do was to be “not at home” to an intrusive public.

“You are mistaken,” insisted the Chancellor, “his Royal Highness is at home, and will receive us. It will be better for you to admit us without further delay.”

Under the domination of those eyes which could quell a turbulent Reichstag, the jäger weakened, as his master had doubtless expected him to do after the first resistance.

“It may be I have made a mistake, sir,” he stammered, “though I do not think so. If you will have the kindness to walk in and wait for a few minutes until I can inquire whether his Royal Highness has come home, or will come home—”

“That is not necessary,” said the Chancellor. “His Royal Highness dines here this evening. We will go with you to the door of the dining-room, which you will open for us, and announce that two gentlemen wish to see him.”

At sight of her the Emperor stopped on the threshold
At sight of her the Emperor stopped on the threshold

With this, all uncertainty in the mind of the jäger was swept away. He knew his duty and determined to stand by it; and the Chancellor saw that, if the master had

given instructions meaning them to be over-ridden, at least the servant was sincere. He put himself in the doorway, and looked an obstacle difficult to dislodge.

“That is impossible, sir!” he exclaimed. “I have had my orders, which are that his Royal Highness is not at home to-night, and until I know whether or not these orders are to stand, nobody, not if it were the Emperor, should force his way.”

“Fool, those orders are not for us; and it is the Emperor who will go in.” With a step aside, the Chancellor let the light from the hanging lamp in the hall shine full upon Leopold’s face, hitherto masked in shadow.

His boast forgotten, the jäger uttered a cry of dismay, and with a sudden failing of the knees, he moved, and left the doorway free.

“Your Majesty!” he faltered. “I did not see—I could not know. Most humbly I beg your Majesty’s gracious pardon. If your Majesty will but hold me blameless with my master—”

“Never mind yourself, and never mind your master,” broke in the Chancellor. “Open that door at the end of the hall, and announce the Emperor and Count von Breitstein.”

The unfortunate jäger, approaching a state of collapse, obeyed. The door of the dining-room, which Leopold knew of old, was thrown open, and a quavering voice heralded “His Imperial Majesty the Emperor, and the Herr Chancellor Count von Breitstein.”

The scene disclosed was as unreal to Leopold’s eyes as a painted picture; the walls of Pompeian red; the gold candelabra; the polished floor, spread with the glimmering fur of Polar bears; and in the center a flower-decked table lit with pink-shaded lights, and sparkling with gold and crystal; springing up from a chair which faced the door, a young man in evening dress; sitting motionless, her back half turned, a slender girl in bridal white.

At sight of her the Emperor stopped on the threshold. All the blood in his body seemed rushing to his head, then surging back upon his heart.

The impossible had happened.

CHAPTER XIX

THE THIRD COURSE

The Prince came forward. “What a delightful surprise,” he said. “How good of you both to look me up! But I wish my prophetic soul had warned me to keep back dinner. We have just reached the third course.” And his eyes met the Chancellor’s.

“All the same,” he went on, “I beg that you will honor me by dining. Everything can be ready in a moment; and the *bisque eccrevisso*—”

“Thank you,” cut in the Emperor. “We cannot dine.” His voice came hoarsely, as if a fierce hand pinched his throat. “Our call is purely one of business, and—a moment will see it finished. We owe you an explanation for this intrusion.” He paused. All his calculations were upset by the Chancellor’s triumph; for to plan beforehand, what he should do if he found Helen Mowbray dining here alone with the Prince, would have been to insult her. His campaign had been arranged in the event of the Chancellor’s defeat.

Now, the one course he saw open before him was frankness.

To look at the girl, and meet guilt or defiance in her eyes would be agony, therefore he would not look, though he saw her, and her alone, as he stood gazing with a strained fixedness at the Prince.

He knew that she had risen, not in frightened haste, but with a leisured and dainty dignity. Now, her face was turned to him. He felt it, as a blind man may feel the rising of the sun.

He wished that she had died before this moment, that they had both died last night in the garden, while he held her in his arms, and their hearts beat together. She had told him then that she loved him; yet she was here, with this man—here, of her own free will, the same girl he had worshiped as a goddess in the white moonlight, twenty-four hours ago.

The thought was hot in his heart as the searing touch of iron red from the fire. The same girl!

His blood sang in his ears, a song of death, and for an instant all was black around him. He groped in black chaos where there was neither light nor hope,

and dully he was conscious of the Chancellor’s voice saying, “Your Majesty, if you are satisfied, would you not rather go?”

Then the dark spell broke. Light showered over him, as from a golden fountain, for in spite of himself he had met the girl’s eyes. The same eyes, because she was the same girl; sweet eyes, pure and innocent, and wistfully appealing.

“My God!” he cried, “tell me why you are here, and whatever you may say, I will believe you, in spite of all and through all, because you are You, and I know that you can do no wrong.”

“Your Majesty!” exclaimed the Chancellor. But the Emperor did not hear. With a broken exclamation that was half a sob, the girl held out both her hands, and Leopold sprang forward to crush them between his ice-cold palms.

“Thank Heaven!” she faltered. “You are true! You’ve stood the test. I love you.”

“At last, then, I can introduce you to my sister Virginia,” said the Crown Prince of Hungaria, with a great sigh of relief for the ending of his difficult part.

CHAPTER XX

AFTER THE CURTAIN WENT DOWN

They were alone together. Adalbert and Count von Breitstein had stolen from the room, and had ceased to exist for Leopold and Virginia.

“I’ll tell you now, why I’m here, and everything else,” she was saying; but the Emperor stopped her.

“Ever since I came to myself, I wanted no explanation,” he said. “I wanted only you. That is all I want now. I am the happiest man in the universe. Why should I ask how I came by my happiness? Virginia! Virginia! It’s a more beautiful name even than Helen.”

“But listen,” she pleaded. “There are some things—just a few things—that I long to tell you. Please let me. Last night I wished to go into a convent. Oh, it was because I loved you so much, I wanted you to seem perfect, as my hero of romance, just as you were already perfect as an Emperor. To think that I should have been far away, out of Rhaetia, by this time, if Miss Portman hadn’t been ill. Dear Miss Portman! Maybe if we’d gone, nothing would ever have come right. Who can say?

“You know, my brother came to our hotel this afternoon. When his card arrived, we couldn’t tell whether he knew our secret or not; but when we had let him come up, we had only to see his face of surprise! He was angry, too, as well as surprised, for he blurted out that there were all sorts of horrid suspicions against us, and mother explained everything to him before I could have stopped her, even if I would; how I had not wanted to accept you unless you could learn to love me for myself, and then—how I had been disappointed. No, don’t speak; that’s all over now. You’ve more than atoned, a thousand times more.

“Dal explained things, too, then—very different things; about a plan of the Chancellor’s to disgust you with me, and how he—Dal—had played into the Chancellor’s hands, because, you see, he thought he was acting wisely for his neglected sister’s sake, and because he had really supposed an actress he knows was masquerading as Miss Mowbray. Very imprudently he’d told her that some day there might be—something between you and his sister. She knew quite well, too, that the real Mowbrays were our cousins; so you see, as she and he have quarreled it might have been an easy and clever way for an unscrupulous woman

to take revenge. Dal would have gone, and perhaps have said dreadful things to the Chancellor, who was waiting down-stairs for news, but I begged him not. From being the saddest girl in the world, I'd suddenly become the happiest, for the Chancellor had told Dal, and Dal had told me, that you had *followed Helen Mowbray to ask her to be the Empress*. That changed everything, for then I knew you really loved her; but—just to punish you for what I suffered through you last night, I longed to put you to one more test. I said, 'Let the Chancellor carry out his plot. Let me go with you to your hunting lodge.' At first Dal wouldn't consent, but when I begged him, he did,—for generally I can get my way with people, I warn you.

"We shall never be old, for we love each other," said the Emperor
"We shall never be old, for we love each other," said the Emperor

"That's all, except that I hadn't realized how severe the test would be, until you came in and I saw the look in your eyes. It was a dagger of ice in my heart. I prayed Heaven to make you believe in me, without a word, oh, *how* I prayed through all that dreadful moment, and how I looked at you, saying with my eyes, 'I love you; I am true.' If you had failed me then, it would have killed me, but —"

"There could be no but," the Emperor broke in. "To doubt is not to love. When a man loves, he knows. Even out of darkness, a light comes and tells him."

"Then you forgive me—for to-night, and for everything, from the beginning?"

"Forgive you?"

"And if I'd been different, more like other girls content with a conventional affection, you wouldn't have loved me more?"

He took her in his arms and held her as if he would never let her go.

"If you had been different, I wouldn't have loved you at all," he said. "But if *things* had been different, I couldn't have helped loving you, just the same. I should have been fated to fall in love with Princess Virginia of Baumenburg-Drippe at first sight, exactly I as fell in love with Helen Mowbray—"

"Ah, but at best you'd have fallen in love with Virginia because it was your duty; and you fell in love with Helen Mowbray because it was your duty not to. Which makes it so much nicer."

“It was no question of duty, but of destiny,” said the Emperor. “The stars ordained that I should love you.”

“Then I wish—” and Virginia laughed happily, as she could afford to laugh now —“that the stars had told me, last summer. It would have saved me a great deal of trouble. And yet I don’t know,” she added thoughtfully, “it’s been a wonderful adventure. We shall often talk of it when we’re old.”

“We shall never be old, for we love each other,” said the Emperor.

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