

Williamson Alice Muriel

The Adventure of Princess Sylvia



Alice Williamson

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Mrs. C. N. Williamson

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CHAPTER I

THE ADVENTURE BEGINS

"Who is Sylvia? What is she,
That all our swains commend her?"

"I'm dashed if I do!" said the Princess.

"My dear – if anyone should hear you!" groaned the Grand Duchess. "He is a most estimable young man, I am sure, and a very suitable match."

"Call him a match, if you like; he's certainly a stick. Anyway, he's not a match for me. There's only one existing." And the Princess's eyes were lifted to the heavens, as if the being at whom she hinted were placed high as the sun that shone above her.

The Grand Duchess was not herself "Hereditary." Her dear lord and master had been that, which was perhaps the reason why such stateliness as she had was almost all acquired. She dropped it sometimes, when alone with her unmarried, unmanageable young daughter; and to-day (in the sweet, old-fashioned garden of the house at Richmond, lent by Queen Victoria) was one of these occasions. The Grand Duchess pouted, and looked like a plump, sulky, elderly child, as she inquired what the Princess Sylvia expected in the way of a matrimonial prize.

"What do I expect?" echoed the young lady. "I expect an emperor. In fact, *the* Emperor." For a few moments the Grand Duchess of Eltzburg-Neuwald remained dumb. Then she inadequately murmured, "Dear me!" Yet her demeanour did not suggest a stricken mind. She merely looked surprised, with an added expression that might signify a slow mental readjustment.

"It is really not entirely impossible," she commented at last. "But – the Emperor of Rhaetia is a very great man."

"He is the only man," returned the Princess calmly. "He always has been. He is, and ever will be. He is the Napoleon of his generation, without Napoleon's meanness or brutality. Although he's not an Englishman, even you admit his virtues."

"Don't speak as if I were bristling with English prejudices," scolded the Grand Duchess. "I ceased to be English when I married your father. But why did you never mention this – er – desire of yours before?"

"I am far too maidenly," responded Sylvia, "to give my feeling any such bold name. *I* have not ceased to be English, if my mother has. Indeed, I give my feeling no name at all. I haven't spoken of it if there be an 'it' to speak of – before, simply because really I'm not crying for a particular toy to play with. I'm only saying, if I can't have *that*, I won't have another toy a poor, unworthy toy."

"You call Prince Henri d'Ortens a 'poor, unworthy toy?'"

"Compared with the Emperor of Rhaetia and compared with me. Look at me, mother. Would I not make an empress?"

Sylvia laughed, sprang up from the seat that girdled the great trunk of the Lebanon cedar, and stood with her bright head erect, her lips still smiling.

The August sun streamed down upon the girl and bathed her in its glory. Her hair was a network of spun gold, under its radiance; her dark eyes jewels; her skin roses and snow; her simple white muslin gown a dazzling robe fit for a fairy, rather than an earthly princess.

Yes, she would make an empress, or she would make a goddess. So a man must have thought, even if he had not dared to love her. And so thought her mother.

"The dear Queen has never really favoured poor Henri," murmured the Grand Duchess, a light of introspection in her eyes. Already the French Prince, with pretensions to the incomparable hand of Sylvia, was "*poor* Henri." "I mean, she has never favoured him as a match for you, though she intimated to me yesterday that she saw no insurmountable objections – if you cared for each other – "

"But we don't. At least I don't. Which is all that signifies."

"Pray do not be so flippant. As for Maximilian of Rhaetia, it is perhaps natural that he has never been thought of in connection with you, my dear. He is, no doubt, the most sought after *parti* in – well, yes, I may say in the world. Not a girl with Royal blood in her veins but would go on her knees to him – "

"I would not," cried Sylvia. "I might worship him, but he should go on his knees to *me*."

"I doubt if those knees will ever bend to man or woman," said the Grand Duchess. "That, however, is a mere matter of speech. I am serious now, and I wish you to be. Though you are a very beautiful girl, my child – there is no disguising that fact from you, as it has been dinned into your ears since you were old enough to understand – and there is no better blood in Europe than runs in your veins; still, our circumstances are – er – unfortunately such that – that we are, for the present, slightly handicapped."

"We're beggars," said Sylvia. "But Cophetua married a beggar maid;" and she smiled.

"Pray don't liken yourself to any such persons, my dear," objected the Grand Duchess, who, on principle, had so often objected to Sylvia's unconventionalities that the attitude of objection had become chronic. "Your father is dead. The Grand Duchy of Eltzburg-Neuwald has been absorbed by Prussia – for a price, it is true; but it is your brother who has had most of the benefit of that price. And though my dear husband was second cousin to the Emperor of Germany, who loved him during his life as an elder brother, and though you are strictly *within* the pale from which Maximilian is entitled to select a wife, one must admit that there are other girls who, from a worldly point of view, might be considered more suitable."

"I wasn't thinking of the worldly point of view," said the incorrigible one, with unusual softness. She could be gentle and tender enough in certain moods; but she was used to taking the lead with her mother.

"People – men or women – with Royal blood in their veins *must* think of that point of view," returned the Grand Duchess. She was not Royal, save by marriage, though her long since dead father, the English Duke of Northminster, claimed ancestry from kings and had married a near relation of Queen Victoria. But he had been one of the richest men in the world at the time of his daughter's marriage; and the exchequer of Eltzburg-Neuwald had sadly needed replenishing. It, or rather its representative, had finally swallowed a large part of the Duke of Northminster's private fortune, the enormous remainder having vanished in a great financial panic; so that just before the Hereditary Grand Duke of Eltzburg-Neuwald had been gathered to his fathers, he had been induced to make terms with his cousin, the then reigning German Emperor, for the Grand Duchy. Thus deprived of his inheritance, the only son, Friedrich, had joyfully accepted an offer of adoption as Crown Prince from the childless old King of Abruzzia.

The widowed Grand Duchess, not loving the thought of a German residence, when bereft of her ancient importance; hating her son's adopted land of Abruzzia, which she considered "half savage" (yet liking still less the alternative of a wandering life on the Continent, or a home with the uncle who had inherited her father's title and estates), had gratefully caught at Queen Victoria's kindness. Ever since Sylvia Victoria Alexandra Mary Valerie Hildegard, her daughter, had been a proud little Princess of ten years old, the two had lived in the ancient, rose-and-ivy-embowered house placed at their disposal by Her Gracious Majesty. Sylvia had been educated in England; all her thoughts and ideas were those of an English girl, and a somewhat "advanced" English girl. Her very beauty was more English than German – the delicately chiselled nose, the short, haughty upper lip, the frank imperiousness of the hazel eyes under the black sweep of lashes, and dark, soft curve

of brow. She was twenty-one now, and vastly tired of being Royal, for already her high place in the world had brought her more of inconvenience than privilege.

"I don't wish the Emperor of Rhaetia to want me because I am suitable, but because I am irresistible," she asseverated. "I want love – love – or I won't marry at all."

"But that is nonsense," gravely pronounced the elder, steeped for long years in all the traditions and conventionalities of Royalty. "Women in our position must be satisfied with the hope that love may come after marriage; or, if not, we must rest content in doing our duty in that state of life to which heaven has been pleased to call us!"

"Bother duty!" remarked Sylvia, with an impatient disregard for those elegancies of speech to which she had been so carefully brought up. "Thank goodness, nowadays not all the king's horses and all the king's men can make even a princess marry any one against her will. I hate the everlasting cant about duty in marriage. When people love each other they are kind and good and sweet and virtuous, because it is a pleasure, not because it's duty; and that's the only sort of loyalty worth having between man and woman, according to my ideas. I would not take anything less from a man; and I should despise him if he were ready to accept less from me."

"You are almost impious, Sylvia; you ought to have been born a *bourgeoise*," said her mother. But at this moment, when the clash of tongues, as opinion struck upon opinion, was imminent, there occurred a happy diversion in the arrival of a servant with letters.

Sylvia, who was a neglectful correspondent, had nothing; but two or three bulky envelopes had come for the Grand Duchess, and eagerly she broke the seal of one which bore the hand writing of her son Friedrich, now Crown Prince of Abruzzia.

"Open the others for me, dear, while I see what Fritz has to say," she requested. And Sylvia leisurely obeyed.

There was a note from an old friend of whom she was fond; and she had just begun to be interested in the first paragraph, when an ejaculation from her mother caused a quick lifting of her lashes.

The Grand Duchess was staring at the scrawled pages, held close to her near-sighted eyes, while a bright flush troubled the surface of her usually serene countenance.

"What is the matter?" exclaimed Sylvia. "Anything wrong with Fritz?"

"No – no – nothing in the least wrong," murmured the Grand Duchess absent-mindedly. "Far from it, indeed; but really – this is the most *extraordinary* coincidence. It seems almost too strange that it should come at such a moment. Yet I suppose I am not dreaming?" She peered questioningly at Sylvia; for it must be confessed that the Grand Duchess did sometimes sleep, perchance even dream, in the warm seclusion of the old riverside garden.

"Life is a dream!" hummed the Princess. "But you *look* awake, dear; and I've never known you to talk whole sentences in your sleep. What has Fritz been doing?"

"It is not Fritz; it's your emperor," returned her mother.

It was now Sylvia's turn to flush. This, then, was the "coincidence"! She wished, yet vaguely dreaded, to ask the purport of the news. Of course it was ridiculous to blush, because it was ridiculous to care. But the fact remained that she did blush and that she did care.

Princess Sylvia had never seen Maximilian of Rhaetia; nevertheless, as she had half laughingly, half earnestly declared, he had been for her the one real man in a world of shadow men, since childish days. In the little room grandiloquently called her "study" (a room sacred to herself alone, whose secrets even her mother did not share) were preserved many souvenirs of the Emperor, which had been accumulating for years. There were paragraphs cut from newspapers, setting forth his great prowess as a soldier, hunter, and mountaineer, with dramatic anecdotes of his haughty courage when in danger. There were portraits of Maximilian, beginning from an early age, up to the present, when he was shown as a tall, stern-eyed, passionate-lipped, aggressive-chinned young man of thirty. There were copies of pictures he had painted, plays he had written, music he had composed, fierce and

warlike speeches he had delivered; accounts of improvements in guns and gun powder invented by him; with numerous other records of his accomplishments and achievements; for the Emperor of Rhaetia was, in his own mind, and that of his people, the one shining exception to the rule that a "Jack of all trades can be master of none." He was master of all, or at least all he had ever attempted – their name being legion – and Sylvia loved him because it was so. The locked drawers of her desk were hallowed by the records of her hero which they hid.

Now, the thought that flashed into her mind was that Fritz's letter might perhaps contain a gossiping account of the Emperor's engagement to one of those other Royal girls, who, as the Grand Duchess had justly observed, were more suitable to match him than poor, pretty little Princess Sylvia of Eltzburg-Neuwald. Maximilian was thirty years old (Sylvia knew his age to the day, almost to the hour); therefore it was remarkable that he had not long ago listened to the advice of his Chancellor and chosen a wife worthy to be Empress of Rhaetia and the mother of an heir.

"Guess what Fritz writes of him," said the Grand Duchess, controlling visible emotion.

Sylvia also controlled hers, crushing it down with a relentless hand, and telling herself that what she felt was at its worst but wounded vanity.

"He's going to be married?" she quietly suggested.

"That depends." Her mother laughed nervously, with a stifled and mysterious delight. "Guess again – but no, I won't tease you. After this letter, coming as it has in the midst of our conversation, I shall be a firm believer in *telepathy*. It is too wonderful. He may be going to be married; he may not. For, my dear, *dear* child, he wants – to marry *you*."

Sylvia sprang to her feet. Perhaps such exhibition of feeling on the part of a Royal maiden decorously sued (by proxy) for her hand, was hardly correct. But Sylvia thought of no such considerations. She did not even know that she had left her chair. For a moment a delicate blue haze floated between her eyes and the Grand Duchess's pleased, plump face.

"He – wants – to – marry – me?" she echoed dazedly.

"Yes, you, my darling. Providence must have drawn your inclination toward him. It is really a romance. Some day, no doubt, it will be told to the world in history."

Sylvia did not hear. She stood quite still, her hands clasped before her, the letter she had been reading on the grass at her feet.

"Did he – the Emperor – tell this to Fritz and ask him to write to you?" she questioned.

"Not – not exactly that, dear," admitted the Grand Duchess, her face changing; for Sylvia was so exacting and held such peculiar ideas, that it was sometimes rather difficult to know how she would receive the most ordinary announcements.

The rapt expression faded from Sylvia's features, like the passing of dawn.

"Not – exactly that?" she repeated. "Then what – how?"

"Perhaps – though it is not strictly the correct thing – you had better read Fritz's letter?"

Sylvia put her hands behind her back with a childlike gesture. "I – somehow I don't want to. Please tell me," she said simply.

"Well, then, you know what an admiration Fritz has felt for Count von Markstein, the Rhaetian Chancellor, ever since the visit the Chancellor paid to Abruzzia? They have kept up a correspondence from time to time, and the sort of friendship which often exists between an old man with a great career behind him and a young man with his still to come. Now it seems (in the *quite* informal manner by which such affairs are generally begun) that Count von Markstein has written confidentially to Fritz, as our only near male relative, to ask how we would regard an alliance between you and Maximilian, or if we have already disposed of your hand. The Emperor is inclined to listen to advice at last; and you, as a Protestant Princess – "

"Yes, a Protestant Princess more than ever, for I protest against being approached upon such terms!" Sylvia exclaimed.

The countenance of the Grand Duchess became overcast. There were certain drawbacks in having a spoiled beauty for a daughter. "Sylvia," she ejaculated, "surely you don't mean – surely you are not going to throw over such a marvellous chance as this – a chance that a queen's daughter might gladly accept – because of a sentimental schoolgirl scruple?"

"Why do you suppose the Emperor – or his Chancellor – thinks of any one so insignificant for such a high place, when there are others far more eligible?" asked Sylvia, with reflective dryness, answering one question by another.

"Fritz goes on to mention various good reasons in his letter, if you would only let me tell you, and would take them sensibly," said the much-enduring elder woman.

"I should like to hear them, at all events," Sylvia judicially replied.

"Well, as I was beginning to explain, the Empress of Rhaetia must be a Protestant. At present, as Fritz says, there are not many eligible young Protestant Princesses who would be acceptable to the Rhaetian people and add to the Emperor's popularity. Then, as you know, Maximilian is a man who dominates those around him; he wishes to marry a young girl who, though of Royal birth, could not by any possibility have been heiress to a throne of her own. I fancy he would choose to mould his wife and to take a girl without too many important or importunate relatives; for he is not one who would dream of adding to his own greatness by that of a wife. Besides, Maximilian is partial to England, and the fact that you have had an English education would be favourably rather than unfavourably regarded both by him and Count von Markstein – at least, so Fritz believes. And though I have never allowed you, since you were a child, to have your photograph taken, and you have lived in such seclusion that you have been little seen, still the rumour has somehow reached Maximilian's ears that you are – not ugly. He has been heard more than once to remark that whatever the future Empress of Rhaetia might be, she would not be a plain woman; therefore, altogether – "

"Therefore, altogether, my references appear to be satisfactory, and at a pinch I might do for the place," broke in Sylvia, with hot impatience. "Oh, mother, I will marry Maximilian, or I will marry no man; but I won't be married to him in Count von Markstein's hateful cut-and-dried way."

"It's the Emperor's way, as well as Markstein's."

"Then for once in his big, grand, obstinate life, he shall learn that there are other wills than his in the world; and that there is one woman who won't play Griselda even for the sake of being his Empress."

The Grand Duchess looked worried (as well she might, had she been blessed or banned with a prophetic soul to whisper of the future). "You look so odd when you say that," she observed; "as if you had – some kind of plan."

"And so I have," confessed Sylvia. "It came to me suddenly – as all inspirations come. It's in embryo yet; but I shall fill in the details." She came close to her mother, and knelt down on the grass at her feet, looking up with a light in her eyes that no man, and few women, could have resisted.

There was nobody save the Grand Duchess and the late roses to see how a young princess threw her mantle of dignity to the winds; for the two ladies did not keep Royal state and a Royal retinue in the quaint old house at Richmond; and the arbour hid their confidence from intrusive eyes or ears.

"You do love me, don't you, dear?" cooed Sylvia, softly as a dove.

"You know I do, my daughter, though I don't pretend to understand you."

"People grow dull when we understand them too well. It's like solving a puzzle; there's no more fun in it when it's finished. But you *do* wish me to be happy?"

"More than anything else – except, of course, Fritz – "

"Fritz is a man and can take care of himself. *I* must only do the best I can. And there's something I want *so* much, and it would give me a heaven on earth, all my own, if I could win it. Maximilian's love, quite for myself, as a *girl*, not a proper, 'Protestant Princess'. I think I see how I *can* win it, too, if you will only help me."

"I'll do my best," cried the Grand Duchess, carried out of herself into unwonted impulsiveness by kisses soft and sweet as falling rose- leaves. "Only I don't see what I *can* do."

"But *I* see; and you must promise to see with my eyes."

"They are very bright ones!" laughed her mother.

Princess Sylvia put both arms round the plump waist, and gave the Grand Duchess a hug. Then she laughed – an odd, musical, half- frightened laugh. "Mother, something wonderful is going to happen to you and me," she exclaimed. "We're going to have an adventure."

CHAPTER II

THE INADVERTENCE OF FRAU JOHANN

TWILIGHT fell late in the tiny Rhaetian village of Heiligengelt. So high on the mountain-side were set the few brown chalets, the simple inn, and the church with its Oriental spire, that they caught the last red rays of sunlight, to hold them flashing on burnished copper tiles and small bright window-panes long after the valley below slept in the shadows of night.

One September evening two carriages toiled up the steep winding road that led to the highest hamlet of the Rhaetian Alps, and a girl walking by the side of the foremost driver (minded, as he was, to save the tired horses) looked up to see Heiligengelt glittering like a necklet of jewels on the brown throat of the mountain. Each window was a separate ruby set in gold; the copper bulb that topped the church steeple was a burning carbuncle; while above the flashing band of gems towered the rocky face of the mountain, its steadfast features carved in stone, its brow capped with snow that caught the glow of sunset, or lay in blue-white seams along the wrinkles of its forehead.

The driver had assured the young English lady that she might remain in the carriage; her weight would be as nothing to the horses, who were used to carrying far heavier loads than this of to-day up the mountain road to Heiligengelt in the summer season, when many tourists came. But she had insisted on walking and the brown-faced fellow with the green hat and curly cock-feather liked her the better for her persistence. She was plainly dressed, and not half as grand in her appearance as some of the ladies who went up with him in July or August to visit little Heiligengelt; but, apart from her beauty (which his eye was not slow to see), there was something else that captured both admiration and respect. Perhaps, for one thing, her knowledge of Rhaetian – counted by other countries a difficult language, though bearing to German a cousinship closer than that which Romance bears to Italian – did much to warm the Rhaetian's heart. At all events, without stopping to analyze his feeling, or grope for its cause, the driver of the first carriage found himself bestowing voluble confidences upon the charming foreigner.

He told her of his life: how he had not always lived in the valley and driven horses for a living. Before he took a wife, and had a young family to rear, he had made his home in Heiligengelt, which was his native village. There his old mother still lived and kept the inn. He was glad that the ladies meant to stop with her for a few days; after the season was over, and the strangers had all been driven away by the cold and early flurries of snow, the poor mother grew weary of idleness and longed for the sight of new faces. There were not many neighbours in Heiligengelt. She would be pleased to see the English ladies, and would do her best to make them comfortable, though it was not often that strangers came so late in the year. The mother would be surprised as well as rejoiced at the sight of the Herrschaft, since it seemed that they had not written in advance. Still, they need not fear that her surprise would interfere with their welfare. Those who knew Frau Johann knew that her floors ever shone like wax, that her cupboard was never empty, that her linen was aired and scented like the new-mown hay. It was but justice to say this, although she was his mother. And besides, she had need always to be in readiness for distinguished guests, because – but the eloquent tongue of Alois Johann was suddenly silenced like the clapper of a bell which the ringer has ceased to pull, and his sunburnt face grew sheepish.

"Because of what?" urged his companion.

Alois shrugged his shoulders and laughed. "I was going to say a thing which I had no business to say," he confessed. "We men sneer at our women because they keep no secrets, yet sometimes we find ourselves near to the same foolishness. I must take care, and beg that the noble lady will not embarrass me with questions."

The noble lady obediently held her tongue, yet there was a twinkle under her long, downcast lashes, which might in turn have aroused Alois's curiosity if he had seen.

Slowly they climbed on; the two carriages, with the noble lady's noble mother, the middle-aged companion, the French maid, and the modest supply of luggage, toiling up behind.

At last they reached the inn with the steeply pointed roof of gray shingles and the big picture of Heiligengelt's patron saint portrayed in bright colours on the white house-wall. A characteristic call from Alois, sent forth before the highest plateau was reached, brought an apple-cheeked old dame to the front door; and it was the youngest of the travellers who asked, with a pleasant greeting, for the best suite of rooms that Frau Johann could provide.

The Rhaetian woman and her son exchanged a glance which mirrored mystery. Then Frau Johann regretted that her best rooms were already occupied by four gentlemen who came each year at this season to spend a week or ten days. They had the bedchambers commanding the finest view, and the only private sitting-room in the house; but there were other good rooms in plenty, and one of these could easily be transformed into a sitting-room, if the ladies desired.

An hour later, when the newcomers, mother, daughter, and companion, sat down to a hot supper in a room rendered hastily habitable for dining, the youngest of the three remarked to Frau Johann upon the peaceful stillness of her house.

"One would think that there was not a soul in the place save ourselves," she said. "Yet we are not your only guests, we know."

"The gentlemen who are stopping with me are away all day on the mountains," explained Frau Johann. "It is now the season for chamois-hunting, and it is for that sport and also some good climbing, only to be done by experts, that they come to me. To-night they do not return, but stop at – at a hut they have near the top of the Weisshorn, to begin work in the morning earlier than would be possible if they slept in the village. That, indeed, is their constant custom."

"Then they are rather selfish to keep your only sitting-room, since they can make but little use of it," said the girl. "And so I should like to hint, if I happened to meet them."

"May heaven forbid!" hastily ejaculated Frau Johann, almost dropping the plate of eggs with minced veal which she was carrying.

"Why not, then?" laughed the young English lady, who was the most beautiful creature the Rhaetian woman had looked upon for many a long day. "Are these gentlemen-hunters persons of great importance, that they must not be told the truth about themselves by those they have inconvenienced in their thoughtlessness?"

For an instant Frau Johann was dumb, as one who searches for an answer not easily to be found. "The gentlemen are good patrons of mine; therefore they are important to me, gracious Fräulein," she at last replied. "I should not like their feelings to be hurt."

"I was only joking," the girl assured her. "We are satisfied with this room, which you have made so pleasant for us. All I care for is that the *mountains* be not private. I may climb as much as I like – I and my friend, Miss Collinson who is a daring mountaineer" (with this, she cast a glance at the companion, who visibly started in response, perhaps at the revelation of her skill); "for I suppose that your other guests have not engaged the whole Weisshorn for their own?"

The landlady's smile returned. "No, gracious Fräulein; you are free to wander as you will; but take care that you do not attempt feats of too great difficulty, and take care also that you are not mistaken for a chamois, to be shot."

"Even our prowess as climbers will hardly entitle us to such a distinction," replied the youngest of the ladies, who seemed so much more inclined toward general conversation than the others. "But wake us early to-morrow. We should like to have breakfasted and be out by half-past seven."

"And will you take a guide, gracious Fräulein? I can engage a good one if you wish to try some of the famous climbs."

"Thank you, no," said the girl. "We have our Baedeker and will only attempt such places as he pronounces safe for amateurs. There's an easy way to the top, we've read, and if to-morrow be fine we may undertake it. But what an excellent engraving you have over the fireplace, with the chamois horns above it! Isn't that a portrait of your Emperor?"

Frau Johann's eyes darted to the picture. "*Ach!* I meant to have had it carried away," she muttered.

The girl caught the words. "Why should it be carried away? Don't you love the Emperor, that you would have his face put out of sight?"

"Not love *unser Max*?" The exclamation came quick and indignant. "We worship him, gracious Fräulein; we would die for him any day, and think ourselves blessed with the chance. Oh, I would not let you go back to your own country with the thought that we do not love the best Kaiser a country ever had. As for the portrait, I did not know I spoke aloud; that sometimes happens to me, since I grow deaf and old. But I only wished it put away because it is so poor, it does *unser Max* (that is what he is pleased to have us call him) no justice. You – you would not recognize him from that picture. The Kaiser is a very different-looking man."

With this, Frau Johann went out to fetch another dish, which was ready in the kitchen, to cool her hot face, and to scold herself for an old *dummkopf* all the way downstairs.

In the bedchamber which had so recently been turned into a dining- drawing-room, the young lady took advantage of the landlady's temporary absence to indulge in long-stifled laughter.

"Poor, transparent old dear!" she exclaimed. "I'm sure she doesn't dream that one reads her like a book. She is in a sad fright now, lest we should recognize '*unser Max*' from his portrait, and spoil his precious incognito."

"Then you think that one of the gentlemen really is – " began the Grand Duchess.

"I am sure that he is," finished Princess Sylvia.

CHAPTER III

THE YOUNG MAN WITH THE BARE KNEES

"THIS is perfectly *awful*!" groaned the unfortunate lady who passed under the name of Miss Collinson.

"Perfectly *splendid*!" corrected her companion.

The elder lady pressed Baedeker convulsively to her bosom, and sat down. "I shall have to stop here," she gasped, "all the rest of my life, and have my meals and night things sent up to me. I'm very sorry; but I shall never move again."

"Don't be absurd, dear; we're absolutely safe," said Sylvia. "I may be a selfish little wretch, but I wouldn't for worlds have brought you into danger. You've come so far; surely you can come a little farther? *Baedeker* says you can. In ten minutes you'll be at the top."

"You might as well say I'll be in my grave; it amounts to much the same thing," retorted Miss Collinson, who was really Miss Jane M'Pherson, and had been Sylvia's governess. "I can't look down; I can't look up, because I keep thinking of what's behind me. After I get my breath and get used to things, I may be comparatively comfortable *here*; but as to stirring, there's no use thinking of it."

"You'd make an ideal hermitess," said Sylvia. "You've the very features for that profession; austere, yet benevolent. But you're not *really* afraid now?"

"Not sitting down," admitted Miss M'Pherson, gradually regaining her accustomed calm. "Do you think you'd be afraid, and lose your head or anything, if I just strolled on to the top for the view, and came back to you in about half an hour?"

"No – o," said the governess. "I may as well accustom myself to loneliness, since I am obliged to spend my remaining years on this spot. But I'm not at all sure that the Grand Duchess would approve –"

"You mean Lady de Courcy. She wouldn't mind. She knows I have a steady head, and – physically – a good heart. Besides, I shall have only myself to look after; and one doesn't need a chaperon for a morning call on a mountain view."

"I'm not so certain about *this* mountain view!"

"You're very subtle. But I *really* haven't come out to look for him this morning. There's plenty of time for that by and by."

"Dear Princess, don't speak as if you could possibly do such a thing at *any* time."

"Miss de Courcy, please! Why do you suppose we are all in *das Land im Gebirge*, if not to pursue a certain imperial eagle to his eyrie, where he masquerades as a common bird?"

"Ah, my dear, don't demean yourself, even to me, who know you so well. You are here not to *pursue*, but to give an Emperor who wants a Princess for his consort a chance to fall in love with herself."

"If he will! But what do Mary de Courcy and Jane Collinson know about the affairs of emperors and princesses? *Au revoir*, dear friend. Presently, if you find the courage to look, you will see me waving a handkerchief-flag at the top."

Sylvia took up her alpenstock and pushed on. There was a route to the highest peak of the Weisshorn only to be attacked by experienced climbers; but the path along which she and Miss M'Pherson had set out from Heiligengelt four hours ago was merely tedious, never dangerous. Sylvia knew that her governess was safe and not half as much frightened by the unaccustomed height as she pretended.

They had started at half-past seven, just as a September sun was beginning to draw the night chill out of the keen mountain air; and it was now nearly twelve. Sylvia was hungry.

In Wandeck, the second largest town of Rhaetia, she had bought rucksacks for herself and Miss M'Pherson; and to-day these acquisitions were being tested for the first time. Each bag stored an abundant luncheon for its bearer while on top, secured by straps passed across the shoulders, reposed a wrap to be used in rain or rest after violent exercise. Sylvia's rucksack grew heavy as she ascended, though at first its weight had seemed insignificant; and spying at a distance a green plateau on the mountainside, it occurred to her that it might be well to lighten the load and satisfy her appetite at the same time.

"That good M'Pherson is quite happy with Baedeker and won't be vexed if I am gone a little longer than I said," she assured herself. There was no gracious plateau at the top of the Weisshorn; only a sterile heap of rocks on which to stand for self-gratulation or incidentally to admire the view, and there was, besides, enough difficulty in reaching this lower point of vantage to make the venture attractive. The path zig-zagged up, a mere scratch on the face of the mountain; but the plateau, like a terrace laid out upon a buttress, could be gained only by scrambling over rough rocks and climbing in good earnest here and there. Beyond the visible strip of green, the natural terrace stretched away into mystery round the corner like the end of a picture in perspective.

Sylvia calculated the effort and decided that she was equal to it; but before she had gone halfway, she would gladly have stood once more on the path worn by the feet of less ambitious travellers. She even felt a certain sympathy with the sentiments Miss M'Pherson had expressed; yet there was nothing to do but go on. It would be worse to turn than to proceed. Her cheeks began to burn, and her heart to tap a warning against her side. How huge a giant was this mountain – towering above her, falling sheer away beneath her feet, down there where she did not care to look how – pitifully insignificant she!

But there was the plateau, bathed in sunshine like the Promised Land. And to her ears was wafted therefrom the sound of a man's voice, cheerily, melodiously jödeling.

"What if it should be he?" thought Sylvia. She had come all the way from England to meet him, and it was hard that he should jödel while she perished. Much good would it do her if her spirit beheld him bending over her crushed material remains.

Still the voice of the invisible one jödelled on.

"Help!" Sylvia added an impromptu to the chorus. "He may as well save me, be he emperor or tourist. Oh, I hope this isn't a lesson not to climb too high. Ought I to call for help in Rhaetian or English? I'll try both, to make quite sure."

She did try both, with the result that the jödeling suddenly stopped. Instead, an iron-shod boot rang against a rock. Forgetting fear in desire to know whether the actor now to appear for the first time on her life's stage would be hero or super, her foot slipped from its scanty hold. Stumbling, she slid from the rocky ledge down to the plateau, finally landing on her knees at the feet of a young man who strode hastily round the corner.

"Himmel!" exclaimed a voice, half laughing, half startled. She dared not look up, lest she should meet disappointment. Would it be he, sent to her by Destiny, or some tourist, sent by Cook?

One who knew Maximilian's habits well (the only one, besides her mother, wholly taken into confidence) had told her that to find him as a man, and not an emperor, she should make her pilgrimage to Heiligengelt in the chamois-hunting season. She had remembered this hint. She had come; was she now about to see?

Two brown hands were held out to help her. Slowly she raised her eyes. They travelled up and up. Beginning with a pair of big nailed boots, they glided over the knitted detail of woollen stockings, and were stopped for an instant at an unexpected obstacle in the shape of bare, muscular brown knees. (Thank goodness, at least Fate had spared her a tourist!) Short, shabby trousers; a gray coat, passemoiled with green, from one pocket of which protruded a great hunch of bread and ham, evidently just thrust in; broad shoulders; a throat like a column of bronze; a face – the blood leaped in Sylvia's veins and sang in her ears. It was he – it was he! Here was the eyrie: the eagle was at home.

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 dreamed of by night and day. A dark, austere face, with more of Mars than Apollo in its lines, but to her worth all the ideals of all the sculptors in the world. He was dressed as a chamois-hunter, and there was nothing in the well-worn costume to distinguish the wearer from the type he represented; but as easily might the eagle to whom she likened him try to pass for a barnyard fowl as this man for a peasant – so Sylvia thought.

She hoped that he did not feel the beating in her fingers-ends as he caught her hands, lifted and set her on her feet. There was humiliation in this tempest of her pulses, knowing that he did not share it. To her, this meeting was an epoch: to him, a trivial incident. She would have keyed his emotion to hers, if she could, but since she had had years of preparation, he a single moment, perhaps she might have rested satisfied with the expression in his eyes.

It said, had she been calm enough to read it: "Is heaven raining goddesses to-day?"

Now, what was she to say to him? How make the most of this wonderful chance that had come, to know the man and not the Emperor? Each word should be chosen, like a bit of mosaic that fits into a complicated pattern. She should marshal her sentences as a general marshals his battalions, with a plan of campaign for each one. A spirit-monitor (a match-making monitor) seemed to whisper these advices in her ear; yet she was powerless to heed them. Like a school girl about to be examined for a scholarship, knowing that all the future might depend upon a single hour, the need to be resourceful left her dumb. How many times had she not planned her first conversation with Maximilian, the first words she should speak to rivet his attention, to make him feel that she was subtly different from any woman he had ever known? But now, epigrams turned tail and raced away from her like playful colts refusing to be caught.

"I hope you are not hurt?" asked the chamois-hunter, in the *patois* dear to the mountain-folk of Rhaetia.

Here was a comfort; at least she was not to have the responsibility of playing the first card. Meekly she followed his lead.

"Only in the pride that comes before a fall," she answered, in the tongue she had delighted to learn, because it was her hero's. "There should be a sign between the path and this plateau: 'All save suicides should beware.'"

"We have never thought of the necessity, my mates and I," said the man in the gray coat passemoiled with green. "Until you came, *gna' Fräulein*, no tourist has cared to run the risk."

Sylvia's eyes lit suddenly with a sapphire spark. The spirit of mischief nipped her beating heart between rosy thumb and finger, daring her to a frolic – such a frolic as no girl on earth had ever had. And she would show this grave, austere, self-centred young hero a phase of life he had not seen before. Then, let come what would out of this adventure, at least she should have an Olympian episode to remember.

"Until *I* came?" She caught up the words, standing before him on the spot where he had placed her. "But I am no tourist; I am an explorer."

He raised level, dark eyebrows; and when he smiled half his austerity was gone. So beautiful a girl need be no more than commonplace of thought and speech; indeed, the hunter of chamois expected little else from women. Yet this one bade fair to have surprises in reserve. He had brought down marvellous game to-day, such as no hunter before him had ever found upon the mountain-side.

"I know the Weisshorn well," said he, "and love it; but I cannot see how it rewards the explorer unless you are a climber or a geologist."

"I am neither; but I came in search of something that I have wanted all my life to see," replied the girl.

His face confessed curiosity. "Might one ask the name of the rare thing? Perhaps one might help in the search."

"I feel sure," replied Sylvia graciously, "that you could help me, if you would, as well as any one on earth."

"That is good hearing, lady, though I know not yet how I have deserved the compliment. First I must hear what you seek, and then –"

"I seek a rare plant, that grows only in high, places. It is said to be found here at certain seasons; though I have never met any one who can boast of plucking it. I would that I could be the first."

"Is it the Edelweiss, *gna' Fräulein*. Because, if so, I know where to take you."

She shook her head. "The botanical name is very hard to pronounce. But it is sometimes called by common people *Edelmann*. I should be disappointed to go away without a sight of it though I was warned it would not be wise to come."

"Those were wise who warned you, lady. I know of no such plant as that you mention. If it were here, I must have seen it. The chance was not worth the danger you have run."

"Oh, yes, the chance *was* worth the danger. You – a chamois-hunter – to say that! You must run a thousand risks a day in seeking what you want."

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

"I wonder, is that the theory of all Rhaetians? I know your Emperor holds it."

"Who told you that, *gna' Fräulein*." He gave her a sharp look; but her violet eyes were innocent of guile, as the flowers they resembled.

"Oh, many people. We hear much of him in England."

"Good things or bad?"

"The things that he deserves. Now, can you guess which? But I could tell you more if I were not so very, very hungry. I can't help seeing your luncheon, thrust into your pocket, perhaps, when you came to help me. Do you want it all" (she carefully ignored the contents of her rucksack), "or – would you share it?"

The chamois-hunter looked surprised. But then this was his first experience of a feminine explorer, and he quickly rose to the occasion.

"There is more bread and ham where this came from," he replied, with flattering alacrity. "Will you be graciously pleased to accept something of our best?"

"If *you* please, then I shall be much pleased," she responded. Miss M'Pherson was forgotten. Fortunately the deserted lady was supplied with congenial literature, down below.

"I and some friends of mine have a sort of – hut round the corner," announced the chamois-hunter, with a gesture that indicated direction. "No woman has ever been our guest there, but I invite you to come, if you will. Or, if you prefer, remain here, and in a few minutes I will bring you such food as we have. At best it is not much to boast of. We chamois-hunters are poor men, living roughly."

Sylvia smiled, and imprisoned each new thought of mischief like a trapped bird. "I've heard you're rich in hospitality," she said. "Now is my chance to prove the story."

The eyes of the hunter, dark, brilliant, and keen as an eagle's, pierced hers. "You have no fear?" he said. "You are a woman, alone, in a desolate place. For what you know, my mates and I may be a set of brigands."

"Baedeker does not mention the existence of brigands at present in the Rhaetian Alps," retorted Sylvia, with quaint dryness. "I have always found him very trustworthy. I've great faith in the chivalry of Rhaetian men, whose Emperor – though he thinks meanly of women – sets so good an example. But if you knew how hungry I am, you would not keep me waiting for talk of brigands. Bread and butter is far more to the point."

"Even search for the *Edelmann* may wait?"

"Yes; the *Edelmann* may wait – on me." (The last two words were added in whisper.)

"You must pardon my going first," said the young man with the bare knees. "The way here is too narrow for politeness."

"Yet I wish that our peasants at home had such courteous manners as yours," Sylvia patronized him. "You Rhaetians need not go to Court, I see, for rules of behaviour."

"The mountains teach us some thing, 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 answer the tall figure swung round a corner formed by a boulder, and Sylvia uttered an exclamation of surprise. The "hut" of which the chamois-hunter had spoken was revealed by the turn, and it was of an original and picturesque description. Instead of the humble erection of stones and wood which she had expected, the rocky side of the mountain had been utilized to afford her sons a shelter.

A doorway, and large square panes for windows, had been made in the red-veined, purplish-brown porphyry; while a heavy slab of oak (now standing ajar), and wooden frames, glittering with jewel-like bottle-glass, protected the rooms within from storm or cold.

Even had the Princess been ignorant of her host's identity she would have been wise enough to know that this was no *Sennhutte*, or common abode of peasants who hunt the chamois for a precarious living. The work of hewing out in the solid rock such a habitation as this must alone have cost more than most chamois-hunters could save in a lifetime; but after her first ejaculation she expressed no further amazement, only admiration.

The man stood aside that she might pass into the outer room, and, though she was not invited to further exploration, she could see by the several doors cut in the walls that this was not the sole accommodation which the curious house could boast.

On the stone 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 knives. The table in the middle of the room had been carved with exceeding skill; and the half-dozen chairs were oddly fashioned of stags antlers, formed to hold fur-cushioned, wooden seats. A carved dresser of black oak held a store of the brightly coloured china made by the peasants in the valley below, eked out with platters and tankards of old pewter; and in the great fireplace a gipsy kettle was suspended over a red bed of fragrant pine-wood embers.

"This is a place fit for a king – or even an emperor," Sylvia said, with demure graciousness, when the bare-kneed young man had offered her a seat and crossed the room to open the closed cupboard under the dresser. He was stooping as she spoke, but at her last words looked quickly round over his shoulder.

"We peasants are not afraid of a little work when it is for our own comfort," he responded, "And most of the things you see are homemade during the long winters."

"Then you are all very clever. But, tell me, has the Emperor ever been your guest? I have read – let me see, could it have been in a guide-book, or perhaps in some society paper? – that he comes occasionally to the mountains here."

"Oh yes; the Kaiser has been at this hut – once, twice, perhaps." Her host laid a loaf of black bread, a cut 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 little feet in their strong mountain boots, daintily crossed under the short tweed skirt.

"I hear your Kaiser is a good chamois-hunter," she leisurely remarked. "But that, perhaps, is only the flattery which makes the atmosphere of kings. No doubt, you could give him many points in chamois-hunting?"

The young man smiled. "The Emperor is not a bad shot," he returned.

"For an amateur. But you are a professional. I wager now that you would not change places with the Emperor?"

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

"Change places with the Emperor? Not – unless I were obliged, *gna' Fräulein*. Not *now*, at all events," with a meaning bow and glance.

"Thank you. You are quite a courtier. One of the things they say of him in England is that he dislikes women. But perhaps he does not understand them?"

"Indeed, lady? I had not heard that they were so difficult of comprehension."

"Ah, that shows how little you chamois-hunters know them. Why, we can't even understand ourselves! Though – a very odd thing – we have no difficulty in reading one another, and knowing all each other's faults."

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

"I'm not so sure. Yet the Emperor, we hear, will let his Chancellor choose his."

"Ah! Were you told this also in England?"

"Yes. For the gossip is that she's an English Princess. Now, what is the good of being an Emperor if he can't even pick out a wife to please himself?"

"I know little about such high matters, *gna' Fräulein*. But I fancied that Royal folk chose wives to please the people rather than themselves. If the lady be of good blood, virtuous, of the right religion, and pleasant to look at, why – those are the principal things, I suppose."

"So should I not suppose, if I were a man – and an emperor. I should want to fall in love."

"Safer not; he might fall in love with the wrong woman." And the chamois-hunter looked with a certain intentness into his guest's deep eyes.

She flushed under the gaze, and answered at random, "I doubt it he *could* fall in love. A man who would let his Chancellor choose! He can have no heart at all."

"He has perhaps found other things more important in life than women."

"Chamois, for instance. *You* would sympathize there."

"Chamois give good sport. They are hard to find; hard 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 hope that one day your Emperor will be forced to change his mind – that a *woman* will make him change it!"

"Perhaps a woman has – already."

Sylvia grew pale. Was she too late? Or was this a hidden compliment which the chamois-hunter did not guess she had the clue to understand? She could not answer. The silence grew electrical, and he broke it with some slight confusion. "It is a pity the Kaiser cannot hear you. He might be converted to your more English views."

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

"He would not do that, *gna' Fräulein* – if he's anything like me."

"Which is just what he is – in appearance, I mean, judging by his pictures."

"You have seen his pictures?"

"Oh, yes – you are really rather like him, only browner and bigger, perhaps. Yet I am glad that you are a chamois-hunter and not an emperor – as glad as *you* can be."

"Will you tell me why, lady?"

"Oh, for one reason because I could not ask him to do what I'm going to ask of you. You have laid the bread and ham ready, but you forgot to cut it."

"A thousand pardons. Our conversation has sent my wits wool-gathering. My mind should have been on my manners, instead of such far-off things as emperors." He began hewing at the black 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, if you please," said Sylvia. "There – that is better. I will sit here, if you will bring the things to me. You are very kind – and I find that I am tired."

"A draught of our Rhaetian beer will put better heart into you, it may be," suggested the hunter, taking up the plate of bread and meat he had cut, placing it in her hand, and returning to draw a tankard of foaming amber liquid from a quaint hogshead in a corner.

But Sylvia waved the *krug* away with a smile and a pretty gesture. "My head has proved to be not strong enough for your mountains; I'm sure it isn't strong enough for your beer. Have you some cold water?"

The hunter of chamois laughed and shrugged his shoulders. "Our water here is fit only for the outside of the body," he explained. "To us, that is no deprivation, as we are true Rhaetians for our beer. But on your account I am sorry."

"Perhaps you have milk?" asked Sylvia. "I could scarcely count the cows, they were so many as I came up the mountain."

"There are plenty of cows about," answered the young man dubiously. "But if I fetch one, can you milk it?"

"Pray, good friend, fetch the cow and milk the cow," cried Sylvia. "And here is a trifle to reward all your kindness and trouble."

She would not see the blood rising in a red tide to the brown forehead, but bent her eyes upon her hand, from which she slowly withdrew a ring. It fitted tightly, for it was years since she had had it made, before the little fingers had finished growing. And when she had pulled off the circlet of gold, she held it up alluringly.

"I will do my best to get you the milk," said the hunter, "but we mountain men don't take payment from our guests."

"Here is no *payment*; only something to help you remember the first woman who, as you say, has ever entered this door. Please come at least and look."

The hunter drew near and took the proffered ornament. "The crest of Rhaetia!" he exclaimed, as his eyes fell upon a shield of black and green enamel, set with tiny, sparkling brilliants.

"Press a spring at the left side," directed the giver, a faint tremor in her voice; "and when you have seen the secret it will show, you may guess why I spoke at first of the ring as a reward, and why you can't loyally refuse to accept it."

The brown forefinger found a pin's point prominence of gold, and pressing, the shield flew up to reveal a miniature of Emperor Maximilian.

"You are surprised?" said Sylvia.

"I am surprised, because I understood that you thought poorly of our Kaiser."

"*Poorly*. What gave you that impression?"

"Why, you scorned his opinion of women."

"Who am I to scorn an emperor's opinion, even on a matter he would consider so unimportant? I confess we English girls are interested in your Maximilian, if only because we would be charitably minded and teach him better. But as for the ring they sell such things in Wandeck and many of the towns I have been visiting in Rhaetia. Did you not know that?"

"No, lady, I did not know it."

Nor, as a plain matter of fact, did Sylvia. She had first acted on impulse, and then spoken at random. The ring had been made to order from a design of her own, while she herself had painted the tiny miniature on ivory. But she had been urged by a sudden desire to see him lift the jewelled shield; and the time was not yet ripe for confessions. "Keep the trinket for your Kaiser's sake," she said.

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

"Yes – if you bring me the milk."

The chamois-hunter caught up a gaudy jug, and, without further words, strode out. When he had gone, the Princess rose and lifting the knife he had used to slice the bread and ham, she kissed the handle on the place where his brown fingers had grasped "You are a very silly girl, my dear," she said. "But oh! how you do love him! And what an exquisite hour you are having!"

For ten minutes she sat alone; then the door was flung open and her host returned, no longer with the gay air that had sat like a new cloak upon him, but hot and sulky, the jug in his hand empty still.

"I could not milk the cow," he admitted shortly. "I chased one brute and then another; one I caught, but something was wrong with the abominable beast, for no milk would she give me."

"Pray don't mind," Sylvia soothed him, hiding laughter. "You were kind to try. Luckily you're not the Kaiser, who prides himself on doing all things. I wonder, now, if *he* could milk a cow?"

"He should learn, if not," broke out the chamois-hunter. "There's no telling, it seems, when one may want the strangest accomplishments, and be shamed for lack of them."

"No, not shamed," protested Sylvia. "I am no longer thirsty, and you have been so good. See; while you were gone, I ate the bread-and-ham, and never did any meal taste better. Now, you will have many things to do; I've trespassed too long; and, besides, I have a friend waiting. Will you tell me by what name I shall remember you when I recall this day?"

"They named me – for the Kaiser."

"Oh, then I shall call you Max. *Max*! What a nice name! I like it, I think, as well as any I have ever heard. Will you shake hands for good-bye?"

The strong hand came out eagerly. "But it is not good-bye, *gna' Fräulein*. You must let me help you back to the path and down the mountain."

"I wished, but dared not ask that of you, lest – like your namesake – you were a hater of women."

"That is too hard a word, even for an emperor, lady. While as for me – well, if I ever said to myself, 'Women are not much good to men as their companions', I'm ready to unsay it."

"Then you shall come with me, and we'll look for the *Edelmann*, though I've wasted too much time over my own pleasure. And you shall help me; and you shall help my friend, who is so strong-minded that she will perhaps make you think even better of our sex. And you shall be our guide down to Heiligengelt, where we are staying at the inn. And you shall, if you will, carry our cloaks and rucksacks, which seem so heavy to us, but will be nothing for your strong shoulders."

The face of the chamois-hunter expressed such mirthful appreciation of her commands, that Sylvia turned her head away, lest he should guess she held a key to the inner situation. His willingness to become a beast of burden at the service of the English lady whom he had seen, and her whom he had yet to see, was indubitably genuine. For the next few hours he was free, it seemed – this namesake of the Emperor. He had been out before dawn, and had had good luck. Later, he had returned to the hut for a meal and rest, while his friends went down to the village on business. But he had meant all along to join them sooner or later; and he hoped that he might atone by his assistance for his failure with the cow.

"Do not go away thinking that we Rhaetians, Royal or peasant, are so cold of heart as you have fancied, *gna' Fräulein*," he said at last, when their *tête-à-tête* ended with a sight of Miss M'Pherson's distant profile. "The torrent of our blood may sleep for a season under ice, but when the spring comes, and the ice is broken, then the torrent gushes forth more hotly because it has not spent its strength before."

"I shall remember that," said Sylvia, "for – my journal of Rhaetia."

It was at this moment that the distant profile became a full face, with telescopic eye-glasses, gazing starward.

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"I thought you were never coming," exclaimed Miss M'Pherson; then stopped abruptly at the sight of the young man with bare knees.

"Perhaps I never should, had it not been for the help of this good friend," responded Sylvia; "for I got myself into unexpected difficulties up there. His name is Max, and he is a monarch of –

chamois-hunters. Give him your rucksack and cape, dear Miss Collinson; Max is kind enough to be our guide down the mountain, as you seemed so timid about making the descent with me alone."

Miss M'Pherson, a staunch Royalist and firm believer in the divine right of kings, grew crimson as to nose and ears – a mute protest against this mischievous command. What a thing to have happened! Here was her adored young Princess leading the Imperial Eagle (disguised, indeed, yet Royal withal) a captive in chains. What an achievement even for all-conquering beauty, within the space of one short hour – short for so great a conquest, though it had appeared long enough in waiting. Such triumph was no more than a tribute due to that Rose-of-all-the-World, Princess Sylvia of Eltzburg-Neuwald, and must have been given her by the patron saint of lovers. But that Jane M'Pherson, daughter of a plain country parson of Dumbartonshire, should fling upon the sacred shoulders of an emperor her brown canvas rucksack, stuffed with eggs and bread and cheese; her golf-cape, with goloshes in the pocket, was too monstrous. Her whole nature revolted against the suggestion of such *lèse-majesté*.

"Pray, dearest P – Mary," the unhappy lady stammered, "don't ask me to – really these things of mine are nothing. I can hardly feel their weight."

"All the better for our friend Max, since he is to carry them," came the calm response. "Help her to undo the buckles, please, Max. Now you may have the pleasure of giving her your arm."

CHAPTER IV

MAX VERSUS MAXIMILIAN

"ACH Himmel!" exclaimed Frau Johann. And "Ach Himmel!" she exclaimed again, with frantic uplifting of the hands.

The Grand Duchess turned pale, for the landlady had suddenly exhibited these signs of emotion while passing a window of the private sitting-room. It was the hour for afternoon tea in England, for afternoon coffee in Rhaetia, and already the Princess's mother had begun to look nervously for the climbers return. Naturally, at Frau Johann's outburst of excitement, her imagination pictured disaster.

"What – oh, what can you see?" she implored in piercing accents; but for once the courtesy due to a guest was forgotten, and Frau Johann fled without giving an answer.

Half paralyzed with apprehension, her mind conjuring some sight of terror, the Grand Duchess tottered to the window. Was there – yes, there was a procession. Oh, horror! They were perhaps bringing Sylvia down from the mountain, dead, her beautiful face crushed out of recognition. Yet, no – there was Sylvia herself, the central figure in that procession. A peasant, loaded with cloaks and rucksacks, headed the band, while Sylvia and Miss M'Pherson followed after.

The anxious mother had thrown wide the window, but as she was about to attract the truants attention with an impromptu speech of welcome, the words were arrested on her lips. What was the matter with Frau Johann?

The old woman had popped out of the door like a Jack out of his box, sprung to the much-loaded peasant, and, almost rudely elbowing Miss M'Pherson aside, was distractedly tearing at the bundle of cloaks and rucksacks. Her inarticulate groans ascended to the Grand Duchess at the window, adding to the lady's increased bewilderment.

"What has the man been doing?" the Grand Duchess demanded. But nobody answered, because nobody heard.

"Pray let him carry our thing indoors," Sylvia was insisting, while the peasant stood among the three women, apparently a prey to conflicting emotions. To the Grand Duchess, as she regarded the strange scene through her lorgnette, it seemed that his dark face expressed a mingling amusement, annoyance, and embarrassment. He looked like a man who had somehow placed himself in a false position, and was torn betwixt a desire to laugh and to fly into a rage. He frowned haughtily at Frau Johann, smiled at the two ladies, dividing his energies between secret gestures (which he evidently intended for the eye of the landlady alone) and endeavours to unburden himself, in his own time and way, of the load he carried.

More and more did the Grand Duchess wonder what was going on. Why did this man not speak out what he had to say? Why did Frau Johann at first seek to seize the things which he had on his back, then suddenly shrink away as if in fear, leaving the brown-faced peasant to his own devices? How had he contrived, with a look, to intimidate that brave honest woman?

There was mystery here, thought the Grand Duchess; and she remembered dark tales of brigands, dreaded by all the country-folk, yet protected for very fear. She was painfully near-sighted, but by constant application of the lorgnette she arrived at a logical conclusion.

Frau Johann had doubtless been frightened at seeing her guests coming down the mountain in such evil company. She had rushed to their succour, trying to make sure that their belongings had not been tampered with. But those great brown eyes under the rakish hat had glared a secret warning, and Frau Johann had despairingly abandoned her championship of the ladies.

In the adjoining sitting-room, the Grand Duchess had reason to know, were at that moment assembled some or all of the mysterious gentlemen stopping at the inn. They had probably been attracted to their window by the voices below; and the Grand Duchess courageously resolved that, at

the slightest sign of impudence on the part of the luggage-carrier, these noblemen should be promptly summoned by her to the rescue.

Her anxiety was even slightly allayed at this point in her reflections by the thought (she had not quite outgrown an inmate love of romance) that the Emperor himself might rush to the succour of beauty in distress. His friends were in the next room, having come down from the mountains at noon, and there seemed little doubt that he was among them. If he had not already looked out from the window, and been astonished at sight of so much loveliness, the Grand Duchess decided, upon an inspiration, that he must be induced to do so. She would help on Sylvia's cause and win her gratitude when the true story of this day should be told.

In a penetrating voice, which could not fail to reach the ears of those in the room adjoining hers, or the ears of the actors in the scene below, she adjured her daughter in English. This language was safest, she considered, as the desperado with the rucksacks could not understand and resent her criticism, while the flower of Rhaetian chivalry next door would comprehend both the words and the necessity for action.

"Mary!" she shrieked, loyally remembering in her excitement the part she was playing. "Mary, where did you pick up that alarming-looking ruffian? I believe he intends to keep your rucksacks. Is there no man- servant about the place whom Frau Johann can call to her assistance?"

All four of the actors glanced up, aware for the first time of an audience. Had the Grand Duchess been less near-sighted, less agitated, she might have been surprised at the varying yet vivid expressions of the faces. But she saw only that the tall, dark-faced peasant, who had so glared at poor Frau Johann, was throwing off his burdens with sudden haste and roughness.

"I do hope he hasn't stolen anything," said the Grand Duchess. "Better not let him go until you have looked into your rucksacks. That silver drinking-cup you *would* take up – "

She paused, not so much in obedience to Sylvia's quick reply, as in amazement at Frau Johann's renewed antics. Was it possible that the landlady understood more English than her guests supposed, and feared lest the man with the bare knees – perhaps equally well-informed – might seek immediate revenge? Those bare knees alone were evidence against his character in the eyes of the Grand Duchess. They imparted a brazen, desperate air; and a man who cultivated so long a space between stockings and trousers might easily be capable of any crime.

"Oh, mother, you are very much mistaken. This excellent young man is a great friend of mine, and has saved my life," Sylvia was protesting; and her words began at length to penetrate the ears of the Grand Duchess. Overwhelmed by their full import, she suffered a sudden revulsion of feeling, which caused her to catch at the window-curtains for support.

"Saved your life!" she echoed. "Then you have been in danger. Thank heaven, the young man is not likely to know English, or I should not soon forgive myself. Here is my purse. Give it to him, and come indoors at once. You really look ready to faint."

So speaking, she snatched from a table close by her purse, containing ten or twelve pounds in Rhaetian money; but before she could accomplish her dramatic purpose, flinging the guerdon literally at the misjudged hero's feet, Sylvia prevented her with an imploring gesture.

"He will take no reward for what he has done save our thanks, and those I give him now, for the second time," cried the girl. She then turned to the man, 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. The Grand Duchess still hoped that the Emperor might be at the window, as really it was a pretty sight, and presented a pleasing phase of Sylvia's character.

She eagerly awaited her daughter's approach, and having lingered to watch with impatience the rather ceremonious parting, she hastened to the door of the sitting-room to welcome the travellers as they came upstairs.

"My darling, who do you think was listening and looking from the window next ours?" she breathlessly inquired, when she had embraced her recovered treasure for the secret of the adjoining

room was too great to keep. "You can't guess? I'm surprised at that, since you are not ignorant of a certain person's nearness. Why, who but the Emperor himself?"

"Then he must have an astral body – a *Doppelgänger*," said Sylvia, "since he has been with me all day, and that was he to whom you offered your purse."

The Grand Duchess sat down; not so much because she desired to assume the sitting position as because she experienced a sudden weakening of the knees. For a moment she was unable to speculate: but a poignant thought passed through her brain. "Heavens! what have I done? And it may be that one day he will become my son-in-law."

Meanwhile, Frau Johann – a strangely subdued Frau Johann – had droopingly followed the chamois-hunter into the house.

"My friend, you must learn not to lose your head," said he, when she had timidly joined him in the otherwise deserted hall.

"Oh, but Your Majesty – "

"How many times must I remind you that His Majesty remains in Salzbrück or some other of his residences when I am at Heiligengelt? If you cannot remember, I must look for chamois elsewhere than on the Weisshorn."

"I will not forget again, Your – I mean, I will do my best. Yet never before have I been so tried. To see your noble and high-born shoulders loaded down as if – as if you had been but a common *Gepäckträger* instead of – "

"A chamois-hunter? Don't distress yourself my friend. I have had a very good day's sport."

"It has given me a weakness of the heart, Your – sir. How can I again order myself civilly to those ladies, who – "

"Who have afforded peasant Max a few amusing hours. Be more civil than ever, for my sake, friend. And, by the way, do you happen to know the names of the ladies? That one of them is Miss Collison, I have heard; but the others – "

"They are mother and daughter, sir. The elder, who spoke, in her ignorance, such treasonable things from the window, is called by the Miss Collinson 'Lady de Courcy'. The younger – the beautiful one – is also a miss; and I think her name is Mary. They talk together in English, and though I know few words of that language, I have heard 'London' mentioned not once, but many times between them. Besides, it is painted in big black letters on their boxes."

"You did not expect them here?"

"Oh, no, sir. Had any one written at this season, when I am honoured by your presence, I should have answered that we were full, or the house closed – or any excuse which occurred to me. But no strangers have ever remained in Heiligengelt, or arrived, so late; and I was taken unawares when my son Alois drove them up last night. They are here but for a few days, on their way to Salzbrück, and so home, the pretty Miss de Courcy said; and I thought – "

"You did quite right, Frau Johann. Has my messenger come with letters?"

"Yes, Your – yes, sir; just now also a telegram was brought up by another messenger, who came in a great hurry, and has but lately gone." The chamois-hunter shrugged his shoulders and gave vent to an impatient sigh. "It is too much to expect that I should be left in peace for a single day, even here," he muttered as he moved toward the stairs.

To reach Frau Johann's best sitting-room (selfishly occupied, according to one opinion, by the gentlemen absent all day upon the mountains) he was obliged to pass a door through which issued unusual sounds. Involuntary he paused. Some one was striking the preliminary chords of a *volkslied* on his favourite instrument, a Rhaetian improvement upon the zither. As he lingered, listening, a voice began to sing – such a voice! Softly seductive as the purling of a brook through a meadow; rich as the deepest notes of a nightingale in its first passion for the moon.

The song was the heartbroken cry of an old Rhaetian peasant, who, lying near death in a strange land, longs for the sunrise light on the mountain-tops at home, more earnestly than for heaven.

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