

Williamson Charles Norris, Williamson Alice
Muriel

The Princess Virginia



Charles Williamson
The Princess Virginia

«Public Domain»

Williamson C.

The Princess Virginia / C. Williamson — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	12
CHAPTER III	16
CHAPTER IV	19
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	26

C. N. Williamson, A. M. Williamson

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 jewel-like 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 rucksacks 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 rucksack 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 rucksack 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?

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 rucksack, 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 Edelmänn may wait?”

“Yes. The Edelmänn 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.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.