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THE Princess Virginia

By C. N. and A. M. WILLIAMSON,
Authors of "The Lightning Conductor," "Rose-
mary in Search of a Father," Etc. etc.

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CHAPTER FOUR

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 today?"

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 matchmaking monitor—whispered these wise advice to her ear, yet she was powerless to profit by them. Like a schoolgirl 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 matter 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 passmolewed with green. "Until you came, gna' fraulein, 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, she thought, 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 his eyes austerly were gone.

So beautiful a girl as this need not rise beyond agreeable commonplaces 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 today," he said to himself, and aloud: "I know the Schneeborn well and love it well. Still I can't see what rewards it has for the explorer—unless, gna' fraulein, 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

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' fraulein, on such a spot. You've passed all the worst now. The rest is easy."

She gave him her hand, pleading 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' fraulein—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' fraulein, 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' fraulein?" 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 sort of hut round the corner from this plateau and a short distance on," announced the chamois hunter, with a gesture that gave the direction. "No woman has ever been our guest, but I invite you to visit it and lunch there, or, if you prefer, remain here and in a few minutes I will bring such food as we can offer. At best it's not much to boast of. We chamois hunters are poor men, living roughly."

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

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

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

"Even search for the rare *edelmann* may wait?"

"Yes; the *edelmann* may wait—on me." The last two words she dared but to whisper.

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

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

"The mountains teach us something, maybe."

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

"A man of my sort exists in a town; he lives in the mountains." With this diplomatic response the tall figure swung round a corner formed by a bowlder 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 semibutte, 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 oak 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 gypsy kettle swung over a bed of fragrant pine wood 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 around 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 homemade 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 the guidebook 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," the 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 would not 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' fraulein—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' fraulein, 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' fraulein. He might fall in love with the wrong woman." And the chamois hunter looked with half ashamed 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, was this a concealed compliment which the chamois hunter did not guess she had the clw 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 leze majesty."

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

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

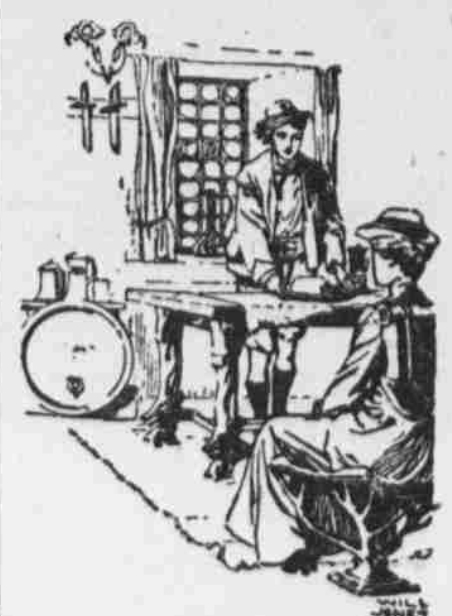
"You have seen his portraits?"

"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 woolgathering. My mind



"A draft of our Rhaetian beer will do you more good than anything."

Should have been on my manners instead of on such faroff 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."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

Sheridan on being asked how we came to call Gibbon "luminous," answered, "I said 'vo-luminous.'"

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