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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.

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"Are you trying to warn me of disaster, baroness?"

She laughed. "Oh, dear, no—of nothing disagreeable! But I should be sorry to think, as you seem to do, that our emperor has no youth in his veins."

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

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

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

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

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

"Were there the slightest chance of such necessity arising?" grumbled the chancellor, shrugging his shoulders. "It's like your integrity and courage. That a comfort, then, that the necessity is so unlikely to arise!"

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

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

At last she was able to judge that she had given the chancellor a few uneasy moments, for his eyes brightened visibly with relief. "Ah," he returned, "then they are going out of Rhaetia?" "Not exactly that," said the baroness slowly, pleasantly and distinctly. "I hear that they've been asked to the country to visit one of his majesty's oldest friends."

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

But tonight a new Leopold moved to the music. A girl's white arm on his—that slender arm which had been quick and firm as a man's in his defense—the perfume of a girl's hair and the gold glints upon it, the shadow of a girl's dark lashes and the light in a pair of gray eyes when they were lifted, the beating of a girl's heart near him, the springtime grace of a girl's sweet youth in its contrast with the voluptuous summer of Rhaetian types of beauty, the warm rose that spread upward from a girl's childlike dimples to the womanly arch of her brows—all these charms and more which rendered one girl a hundred times adorable took hold of him and made him not an emperor, but a man, unarmed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You couldn't help risking your life to"—He dared not finish.

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

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

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

"My ring!" breathed Virginia.

Thus died the emperor's intention to ignore the day that had been theirs together.

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

Virginia felt it would be best to say "Yes," but instead she answered "No," for pretty white fibs cannot be told under such a look in a man's eyes by a girl who loves him.

"I have not? When did you guess the truth—yesterday or?"

"At Allehelligen."

Silence fell for a minute, while Leopold digested the answer and its full meaning. He remembered the bread and ham, the cow he could not milk, the rucksacks he had carried. He remembered everything and laughed.

"You knew at Allehelligen? Not on the mountain when?"

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

"Why?"

"Because one might have to be afraid of an emperor if he were angry."

"Do I look angry?"

Their eyes met again, laughing at first, then each finding unexpected depths in those of the other which drove away laughter. Something in Leopold's breast seemed alive and struggling to be free from restraint, like a fierce wild bird. He shut his lips tightly breathing hard. Both for-

got that a question had been asked, but it was Virginia who spoke first, since it is easier for a woman than a man to hide feeling.

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

"I had a good reason for keeping it."

"Won't you tell me?"

"You're quick at forming conclusions, Miss Mowbray. Can't you guess?"

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

"No."

"Because your own picture is inside?"

"It was a better reason than that."

"Am I not to ask it?"

"On that day you asked what you chose. All the more should you do so now, since there's nothing I could refuse you."

"Not the half of your kingdom, like the royal men in fairy stories?"

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

"Half my kingdom?" Yes, he would give it to this girl if he could. Heavens, what it would be to share it with her!

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

"Then tell me—why you kept the ring."

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

"Now the emperor is pleased to pay compliments."

"You know I am sincere."

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

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

"If you had, perhaps you wouldn't want me for your friend."

"I do want you."

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

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

"My ring!" breathed Virginia, seeing that she was still with the emperor.

"Goodby," said Virginia while her words could still be only for the ears of Leopold.

"Not goodby. We're friends."

"Yes. But we shan't meet often."

"Why? Are you leaving Kronburg?"

"Perhaps—soon. I don't know."

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

"Once more, perhaps. I hope so, but"

"After that?"

"Who knows?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I forgot to tell you something, Virginia."

"Yes, mother?"

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

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

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

"Leave—Kronburg?"

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

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

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

"Was it pleased, or?"

"I was wondering what she could have said to make him look so happy. Perhaps—"

"What answer did you give Baroness von Lyndal?"

"I told her I thought you wouldn't mind. I told her we would go."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

EARTHQUAKE IN MEXICO

City of Chilapa Reported Destroyed, but No Lives Lost.

Mexico City, March 28.—Governor Flores, the chief executive of the state of Guerrero, who is at present in this city, has received the first official advices from the town of Chilapa, said to have been destroyed in the heavy earthquake shock which occurred Thursday night. The message to the governor says that while a number of the buildings of the town were levelled to the ground, no lives were lost. The police quarter and the mayor's office were destroyed and the jail badly damaged. Great fissures were made in the streets and open fields. In the neighboring town of Omatepec, the jail was destroyed and thirty prisoners made their escape. Troops are guarding the public buildings that are standing in Chilapa, but perfect order prevails.

Later returns from Chilapa show, however, that the dispatch received by Governor Flores was ultra-conservative. The town was practically destroyed, though no lives were lost. Most of the buildings that were levelled were residences.

Thirty-four shocks were recorded during the past twenty-four hours by the seismograph at the national observatory at Tabuasca.

Two Drown in Meremac River, Pacific, Mo., March 30.—A wagon in which Henry Gilhouse, his wife and two infant children were attempting to ford the Meremac river, three miles west of here, was overturned by the swollen stream and the four were swept away. Gilhouse and one child were drowned. Mrs. Gilhouse and the other child were saved by fishermen.

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