

The Weary Kings | A Modern Romance

By Richard Voss

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CHAPTER IV.

On the Sea-alp, Spring!

WHAT change of decoration! As by enchantment I find myself in the midst of the great, proud solitude. "They" have indicated to me that I may remain here for a considerable period, and alone, or at least as good as alone, for, with the exception of an old valet, the cook and one lackey, I have no entourage except one cavalier.

And now I am here and I have made a great discovery. I am young still, only 30 years old!

The "Sea-alp" can be reached only over the Alp-mea, 1,000 feet above sea level. No path leads hither, only along the right hand shore might it be possible in emergencies to get here.

Where the lake ends there arises in unapproachable ice-crowned majesty the White Emperor. We royal ones thus are among our own kind.

From the walls of the White Emperor an immense piece seems to have fallen into the depths and smashed there. Everywhere are rack-wrecks. They lie helter-skelter. But the forest drapes the ruin, cloaks it with vines, lets Alpine roses and golden-yellow flowers blossom over it.

Through the gorge the gray mountain torrent riots and over the winding path the snow-banks on the rocks shine nearer and nearer.

Ever wilder, ever more sublime, ever more magnificent! There was the shrill whistle of a chamois. A whole herd goes like an arrow's flight up the steep walls. A shower of loosened stones falls into the sea.

And now we arrive.

A fairly large green meadow lies like an emerald in the gray walls of the White Emperor. Rock, nothing but rock! A broad, shining snowfield above, and at the end of the gorge a glacier with gray top and a deep blue splendid grotto from which the water bursts.

Over my head the blue heavens and at my feet a colored sea of spring flowers. And in the midst of this blissful mead the Sea-alp!

It consists of three buildings erected in the blockhouse style, the so-called King's House, the Cavalier's House, and a building for kitchen and the servants.

I dwell in the King's House. Its whole interior shines with red shimmering cembra pine. From my bed-room I can look straight at the gleaming crown of His Majesty, the White Emperor.

Of my companions in this Alps Idyll I will name "Tony" first.

Young, tall, lean, the whole fellow muscle and power. Light hair, light eyes, brown face. He can see an eagle a quarter of an hour before I can find it with a spyglass. You must know that I am a miserable hunter among other defects.

When I arrived he yodled at me like a madman and gave me his hand, which almost killed my noble valet. Too bad that His Excellency the Lord Marshal was not present.

Besides Tony, two other Alpine mountaineers help to maintain our slight communication with the outer world. And then there is Lolai, the forester's aid, who has been assigned to me.

And he looks like a King's son! And what a son! Other than I! This King's son would bring a race to the throne that could win the world for itself.

When Tony, Lolai and my littleness are together, and Tony opens his red mouth with the gleaming teeth to address one of us two, I expect every time to hear him say to Lolai: "Your Royal Highness."

Lolai himself does not say much. And that, too, becomes him well. He cannot bear me, which makes me very sorry. But I understand it. A man like him, so truly by the grace of God, must have a natural hatred for all that pretends to be of a quite especial grace of God.

Very well do I observe how much self-restraint it costs him to salute me in homage and to stand before me with doffed hat. Therefore I avoid as much as possible forcing him into this position. If it were possible I should like to associate with him in a perfectly social way. It would make me very happy could he learn to like me. His mother is said to have been a great beauty. She lives somewhere nearby. I should like to know her.

If one climbs behind the Sea-alp over a mighty rock-strewn way and up a neck-breaking path one reaches the White Emperor Meadow. There, it is said, a wonderfully beautiful dairy maid lives in loneliness. She is, they tell me, Lolai's sweetheart, and day after day he finds his way up the dangerous path to see her.

I have to think a great deal of the two beautiful young people, of all the happiness that there is on earth and of which I shall never know anything.

There must be something special in connection with Lolai. Accidentally I learned that the forester of the district—he is a late arrival—made a mistake in assigning him to me and had been ordered to recall him. But I vetoed that energetically.

In this I thought less of my own pleasure



in him than of the love of the two handsome beings up there each evening on the White Emperor Meadow. So, for the first time in my life I have done something good.

Count Gebhardt is the cavalier who has been given to me as companion. The Count is only two years older than I, so we could be young together. He is very reserved always, but never a courtier. Therefore he is satisfactory to me.

Of his inner person I know nothing. I should like to learn, not as a Prince, but as one man knows another. But I do not know how I shall go about it.

He is my direct antithesis, for he never speaks of himself, and I think forever of myself, despite the warning of my good, wise brother, that we must not think of ourselves or we shall be lost as on a lonely height. We never speak together of personal matters—of course not. I must not be a personality to him at all.

I long to ask him to tell me of his family, his home, his youth—of all that which is not to be found in the Almanach de Gotha. He was most surely a real boy, with a head full of madness and foolishness. The happy one. Probably he has already loved—a first love, springlike, pure and good.

Is he happy? Did he go willingly with me? Why did he come to court? How could he come to court, free as he is and sagacious and strong?

In one respect we are congenial. We both love solitude. And we both love it so passionately that we avoid each other wherever and whenever we can. I fear the count acts sadly against his instructions, for as a matter of fact he should remain forever at my heels.

If he knew how grateful I am to him for letting me go!

He is small and exceedingly graceful, almost dainty. He has the finest hand I ever saw on a man, white and slender, yet full of character and strength. His features are as distinct and fine as the head of an antique cameo.

What I do not like is his intense elegance. That is so exclusive that it has won even the admiration of my valet.

If Lolai feels a dislike for me, his contempt for the count knows no bound.

CHAPTER V.

I wish to know Lolai's mother and tell him so. On his best behavior, but with a face as if I demanded something outrageous, he replied:

"What does your Royal Highness wish with my mother? She is a poor, worn woman, and ill besides. And she will not receive you well."

"Why not?"

"She cannot bear the great."

"Then you are just like your mother?"

"Why 'just'?"

"Well, you cannot bear me."

He did not say "no." He only looked at me, and—truly, he did not say "no." I should have hugged him.

In the dawn we started on a tour. We had to cross the lake and then go over mountain and valley for nearly three hours.

"I CREEPT NEARER AND LISTENED. I BECAME AN EAVESDROPPER."

It was a beaming morning and I was as happy as a school boy who begins his vacation time.

After we left the boat Lolai walked ahead. I called him back.

"Tell me something of your mother."

"There is nothing to tell about her."

"How old is she?"

"About 60. Maybe she is older."

"Where does she live?"

"With Miss Fritz."

"Who is that?"

"Does your Royal Highness not know Miss Fritz?"

"Why? Is she so famous a person?"

"Surely, Miss Fritz—"

"What a strange name."

"She was christened as a boy."

"As a boy?"

"Her father wanted a boy. But the girl came. Then the old man got into a tremendous rage, and, as he had made up his mind to have a boy, the girl had to be a boy for a time. So he named the child as a boy. Ah, she is a person, this Miss Fritz."

It was the longest speech that I had heard from Lolai's mouth. He spoke with eloquence, absolutely inspired.

I was still inquisitive.

"So your mother is with the splendid Miss Fritz? Is not your father living any more?"

"My father?"

When I looked at him I was frightened. His face was distorted, the whole man was in passionate excitement. I cried to him:

"But Lolai!"

He forced the words through his throat: "My father! If I knew where he is—Heaven, if I knew—"

"Do you not know your father at all?"

"How should I? A grand gentleman it was who treated my mother so, who ruined her body and soul."

"Poor Lolai."

"You need not pity me, because I am only Lolai, only Lolai, without a father. But I will find my fine father yet. And then—"

Without paying further attention to me he went far ahead.

One grand mountain view followed another. The curious Miss Fritz dwelled on the highest estate in the land and we had to climb bravely.

She came to meet us from the field, dressed like a peasant. Her hair was braided and laid simply around her head. She was between thirty and forty. How

did she look? Good. I liked her. I liked her extraordinarily well. She had thrown back the wide sleeves and one could see that her arms were as brown as her face.

"See, I work," said the brown, sturdy arms. "There is nothing more precious than work. Work from morning until evening. Work the whole life long. Yes, look at me. I am a happy being—happy through freedom and work."

The Count approached her, introduced himself and told my name. She was not in the least embarrassed. She was clearly glad to see the son of her King in her high Alpine farm. Smiling, she came to me. Now I knew; this Miss Fritz was not only strong, but also good. Her smile betrayed it. She made a motion as if she would give me her hand, but unhappily she checked the impulse. So I gave her mine and she squeezed it heartily. Before we had spoken a word together I knew that we would become good friends.

I accepted her frank invitation to be her guest, with pleasure. I confessed that I was hungry as a bear and also spoke of my intention of visiting Lolai's mother.

Miss Fritz became very serious at once. I observed that she looked at the Count with surprise and inquiry in her face. At least it seemed so to me. Then she said:

"That is too bad. Lolai's mother isn't here this week. She is up in the mountain dairy, where the air is better for her."

And again it seemed to me as if she looked strangely at Count Gebhardt. He stood turned away from me, so that I could gather nothing from his expression.

Meantime we wandered toward the house. I said to her:

"Lolai told me about you. How did you happen to go up here?"

"Very simply. The world was too narrow for me down in the valley, so I climbed up here—and here I am."

"Did you find this farm here when you arrived?"

"I found nothing. Where the buildings stand there was a pine forest. Where the wheat grows was a morass. I razed the forest, dried the morass, and now you see for yourself."

"The beginning must have been hard."

"Not at all. True, people thought that I was crazy, for so long as the mountains have been standing no daring peasant had ventured to cultivate fields so high above the valley. At first I could get no help here, and had to hire Italian labor. But at last it succeeded. And now, please enter, your