THE

Princess Virginia

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"The devil take my goat!"

Egon started. "A good thing if he did, provided he left you behind," he retorted, meaning exactly the opposite, as he often did when trying to measure wits with the chancellor. "But you sent for me."

"Don't tell me you supposed I sent for you because I wanted consolation or condolence?"

"Now," laughed Egon uneasily. "I fancied there was some other more pressing reason. But I'm bound in common courtesy to take your sincerity for granted until you undeceive me."

"Hang common courtesy between you and me!" returned the bear. "I've nothing to conceal. I sent for you to tell me what mischief that witch Mechtilde von Lyndal is plotting. You're on the spot. Trust you for seeing everything that goes on, the one thing I would trust you to do."

"Thanks," said Egon.

"Don't thank me yet, however grateful you may be. But I don't mind

He had just time to recognize the widow.

blurting that it won't be the worse for you if for once you've used those fine eyes of yours to some useful purpose."

Egon was genuinely astonished at this turn of the conversation, as he had been carefully arming himself against a personal attack from any one of several directions. He sat pouting the sharp ends of his moustache one after the other and trying to remember some striking incident with which to adorn a more or less accurate narrative.

"What would you call useful?" he inquired at last.

The chancellor answered, but indirectly. "Has the emperor been playing the fool at Lyndalberg these last few days?"

"Do you want to make me guilty of lèze majesty?" Egon raised his eyebrows, but he was recovering presence of mind. "If by playing the fool, though, you mean falling in love, why, then, brother, I should say he had done little else during the three days, and perhaps even the first of those was not the beginning."

The chancellor growled out a word which he would hardly have uttered in the imperial presence, particularly in the connection he suggested. "Let me hear exactly what has been going on from day's end to day's end," he commanded.

Egon grew thoughtful once more. Clearly here was the explanation of the summons. He was to be let off easily, it appeared. But, suspense relieved, he was not ready to be satisfied with negative blessings.

"Are you sure it isn't a bit like telling tales out of school?" he objected.

"Schoolboys with empty jackets have been known to do that," said the chancellor. "But perhaps your pockets aren't empty—eh?"

"They're in a chronic state of emptiness," groaned Egon.

"On the 15th day of October your quarterly allowance will be paid," remarked his brother. "I would increase the instalment by the amount of 5,000 gulden if that would make it worth your while to talk—and forget nothing but your scruples."

"Oh, you know I'm always delighted to please you!" exclaimed Egon. "It's only natural, living the monotonous life you do when you're not busy with the affairs of state, that you should like to hear what goes on in the world outside. Of course I'll gladly do my best as a raconteur."

"My dear young man, don't lie," said the chancellor. "The habit is growing on you. You lie even to yourself. By and by you'll believe yourself, and then all hope for your soul will be over. What I want to know is how far the emperor has gone in his infatuation for this English girl. I'm not afraid to speak plainly to you, so you may safely—and profitably—do the same with me. In the first place, I'll put you at your ease by making a humiliating confession. The other night the woman Von Lyndal tried to 'draw me,' as she would express it, on this subject, and I'm bitterly mortified to say she partly succeeded. She suggested an entanglement between Leopold and the girl. I replied that Leopold wasn't the man to pull down a lovemen's shower of gossip around the ears of a young woman who had saved his life. No matter what his inclinations might be, I insisted that he would pay her no repeated visits.

"This thrust the fair Mechtilde parried as if repeating a mere finger by saying that she believed the girl was to stay at the country house of some old friend of the emperor. At the time I attached little importance to her chatter, believing that she merely wished to give me a spiteful slap or two, as is her habit when she has the chance. For once, though, she has succeeded in stealing a march upon me, and she kept the secret of her plan until too late for me to have any hope of preventing Leopold from fulfilling his engagement at her house. After that was safely arranged I don't doubt she was overjoyed that I should guess her plot."

"Do you think that even if you knew sooner you could have stopped the emperor from visiting at Lyndalberg?" asked Egon. "I know that you are iron, but he is steel."

"I would have stopped him," returned the chancellor. "I should have made no bones about the reason, for I've found that the best way with Leopold is to blurt out the whole truth and fight him on experience against his will. If advice and warning hadn't sufficed to restrain him from insulting the girl who is to be his wife and injuring the reputation of the girl who never can be, I would have devised some expedient to this end for his own good. I'm not a man to give up when I feel that I am right."

"Neither is he," Egon added, "but since you seem so determined to pin this dainty blossom of love in the bud we'll hope it's not yet too late for a sharp frost to blight it."

"I sent for you," said the chancellor, brushing away motes in his perfect gesture, "to show me the precise spot on which to set my finger."

"I'll do my best to deserve your confidence," responded Egon gracefully. "Let me see, where shall I begin? Well, as you know, it's simpler for the emperor to see a good deal of the woman he admires at a friend's house than almost anywhere else in his own country. This particular woman rushed her life to save his, and it's so natural for him to be gracious in return that people would be surprised if he were not. There's so much in their favor at the commencement.

"Miss Mowbray and her mother arrived at Lyndalberg before the emperor, had made friends there and were ready for the campaign. The girl is undoubtedly beautiful—the prettiest creature, I think, I ever saw—and she has a winning way which takes with women as well as men. Not one of her fellow guests seems to put a wrong construction on her flirtation with the emperor or his with her. The other men would think him blind if he didn't admire her as much as they do, and none of the women there are of the sort to be jealous. So, are you sure, Lorenz, that you're not taking too serious a view of the affair?"

"It can't be taken too seriously, considering the circumstances. I've told you my plans for the emperor's future. Princesses are women, and gossip is hydra headed. When the lady hears—she who has been allowed to understand that the emperor of Rhaetia only waits for a suitable opportunity of formally asking for her hand—for she will surely hear, that he has seized this very moment for his first liaison, I tell you neither she nor her people are likely to accept the statement meekly. She's half German on her father's side a cousin not too distant of William II. She's half English—on her mother's side related to the king through the line of the Stuarts. And in her there's a dash of American blood which comes from a famous grandmother who was descended from George Washington, a man as proud and with the right to be as proud as any king. All three countries would have reason to resent such an ungallant slight from Rhaetia."

"The little affair must be hushed up," said Egon.

"It must be stopped, and at once," said the chancellor.

"Ach!" sighed the young man, with as much meaning in the long drawn breath as the elder might care to read. And if it did not discourage it at least irritated him. "Go on!" he exclaimed sharply. "Go on with your sorry tale!"

"After all, when one comes to the telling, there isn't a very great deal one can put into cut and dried words," explained Egon. "At table the emperor has his hostess on one side and his first preserver on the other. The two talk as much together during meals as etiquette allows and perhaps a little more. Then, as the emperor has been often at Lyndalberg, he can act as cicerone for a stranger. He has shown Miss Mowbray all the beauties of the place. He gathers her roses in the rose garden; he has guided her through the grottoes; he has piloted her through the labyrinth; he has told her which are the best dogs in the kennels and has given her the history of all the horses in the baron's stables. I know this from the table talk. He has explored the lake with Miss Mowbray and her mother in a motor boat. Perhaps you saw the party? And, whether or no he brought his automobile to Lyndalberg on purpose, in any case he's had the Mowbrays out to several times already. One would hardly think he could have found a chance to do so much in such a short time, but our emperor is a man of action. Yesterday we had a picnic at the Sennach fall to see Thorwaldsen's Undine. Leopold and Miss Mowbray, being strong climbers, reached the statue on the height over the full long before the rest of us. At starting however I was close behind with the baroness and overheard some joke between the two about a mountain and a cow. The emperor spoke of milking as a thing he had lately been taught by his sons. They laughed a great deal at this, and it was plain that they were on terms of comradeship. When a young man and a girl have an understanding, even the most innocent one, it puts them apart from others.

"Last night there were fireworks on the lake. The emperor and Miss Mowbray watched them together, for everything was conducted most informally. Afterward we had an impromptu ball, with three or four professional figures invented by the baroness. The emperor gave Miss Mowbray several favors, and one was a buckle snatched from somebody else. This there was trouble. The emperor and Miss Mowbray played together. They were both so skilful it was a pleasure to watch them. At luncheon they sat a double table out of sight of the others, had a game after it, and Leopold wrote Miss Mowbray surprises. And so it is to the moment of my coming to you. For the afternoon I fancy the baroness was setting up a rising party, and this evening, unless they be too tired, she'll perhaps get up an impromptu concert at which Miss Mowbray will sing. The girl has a delicious voice."

"The ensemble must be a fool or an adventuress," pronounced the chancellor. "If she has kept her senses she ought to know that nothing can come of this folly except sorrow or scandal."

Egon shrugged his stiffly padded military shoulders. "I have always found that a woman in love doesn't stop to count the cost."

"So! You fancy her in love with the emperor?"

"With the man rather than the emperor, if I'm a judge of character."

"Which you're not!" Iron Heart brusquely disposed of that suggestion. "The merest schoolgirl could pull the wool over your eyes if she cared to take the trouble."

"This one doesn't care a rap. She hardly knows that I exist."

"Humph!" The chancellor's eyes appraised his young brother's features. "That's a pity. You might have tried cutting the emperor out. Her affair with him can have no happy ending, while you, in spite of all your faults, with your good looks, our position and my money, wouldn't be a bad match for an ambitious girl."

"Your money?"

"I mean should I choose to make you my heir, and I would choose if you married to please me. Who are these Mowbrays?"

"I haven't had the curiosity to inquire into their antecedents," said Egon. "I only know that they're ladies, that they must be of some consequence in their own country or they couldn't have got the letters of introduction they have and that the girl is the prettiest on earth."

"Mechtilde talked to me. I remember, a good deal about those letters of introduction," the chancellor reflected aloud. "But Rhaetia is a long cry from England, and letters might be forged. I've known such things to be done. Fetch me a big red volume you'll find on the third shelf from the floor at the left of the south window. You can't miss it. It's Burke's Peerage."

Egon rose with alacrity to obey. He was rather thoughtful, for his brother had put an entirely new and exciting idea into his head.

Presently the red volume was discovered and laid on the desk before the chancellor, who turned the leaves over until he found the page desired. As his eye fell upon the long line of Mowbrays his face changed, and the bristling brows came together in a grizzled line. Apparently the women were not adventuresses, at least in the ordinary acceptation of the term.

There they were. His square tipped finger pressed down upon the printed names with a dig that might have signified his disposition toward their representatives.

"The girl's mother is the widow of Reginald, sixth Baron Mowbray," the old man muttered half aloud; "son, Reginald Edward, fifteen years of age; daughter, Helen Agnesta, twenty-eight. Alas! She's no chicken, this young lady. She ought to be a woman of the world."

"Twenty-eight?" replied Egon. "I'll eat my hat if she's twenty-eight."

"Doesn't she look it by daylight?"

"Not an hour over nineteen; might be younger. Love I was never so surprised to learn a woman's age! By the love, I heard her telling Baron von Lyndal last night, apropos of our great Rhaetian victory, that she was eleven years old on the day it took place. That would make her about twenty now. When she spoke I remember she gave a look at her mother across the room as though she were frightened. I suppose she was hoping there was no copy of this big red book at Lyndalberg."

"That thought might have been in her mind," assented the chancellor, "or else she—" He left his sentence unfinished and sat with unseeing eyes fixed in an owlish stare on the open page of Burke.

"I should like to know if you really meant what you said about my marrying a little while ago?" Egon ventured to attract his brother's attention—"because if you did—"

"I did."

"I might try very hard to please you in my choice of a wife."

"Be a little more explicit. Did you mean you would try to persuade Miss Mowbray that a captain of cavalry in the guard is worth an emperor in the bush—a humbler birds at that, eh?"

"Yes, I meant do all that. And, do you say, I'm not without advantages?"

"You are not. I was on the point of suggesting that you make the best of them in Miss Mowbray's eyes until you brought me this red book."

The latter bordereau bared the name of Mowbrays, white two lines with a might have meant nothing at a glance served instead as an index to either side of the chancellor's mouth.

"And now, you've checked your game," he said. There was disappointment in Egon's voice.

"I don't say that. I say only, Make yourself as agreeable to the lady as you like. But don't pledge yourself and don't accept hints and invitations to my house until you hear from me. If that time comes, we shall see what we shall see. Keep your hand up. Pass, and well."

"How long am I to wait? If the thing's to be done at all it must be done soon, for in the hubbub the emperor makes all the running."

The chancellor bended his gaze on the red book, his lot still covering the Mowbrays as if they were to be extinguished. "You are to wait," he said, "until I've had answers to a couple of telegrams I shall send tonight."

CHAPTER TEN

The first and second dressing gongs had sounded at Schloss Lyndalberg on the evening of the day after Egon von Breitstein's visit to his brother, and the grand duchess was beginning to wonder uneasily what kept her daughter when rosed fingers tapped on the panel of the door.

"Come in!" she answered, and Virginia appeared, still in the white tennis dress she had worn that afternoon. She stood for an instant without speaking, her face so radiantly beautiful that her mother thought it seemed illumined from a light within.

It had been on the lips of the grand duchess to scold the girl for her tardiness, since to be late was an unpardonable offense with an imperial majesty in the house. But in that radiance the words died.

"Virginia, what is it? You look I scarcely know how you look. But you make me feel that something has happened."

The princess came slowly across the room, smiling softly, with an air of one who walks in sleep. Hardly conscious of what she did, she sank down in a big chair and sat resting her elbows on her knees, her chin nestling between her two palms, like a pink white rose in its calyx.

"You may go, Ernestine," said the grand duchess to her maid. "I'll ring when I want you again."

The elaborate process of waving and dressing her still abundant hair had fortunately come to a successful end, and Ernestine had just caused a diamond star to rise above her forehead. She was in a robe de chambre, and the rest of her toilet could wait till curiosity was satisfied.

But Virginia still sat dreaming, her happy eyes far away. The grand duchess had to speak twice before the girl heard and started a little. "My daughter, have you anything to tell me?"

The princess roused herself. "Nothing, mother, really, except that I'm the happiest girl on earth."

"Why, what has he said?"

"Not one word that any one might't have listened to. But I know. He does care. And I think he will say something before we part."

"There's only one more day of his visit here after tonight."

"One whole long, beautiful day together!"

"But, after all, dearest," argued her mother, "what do you expect? If in truth you were only Miss Mowbray, marriage between you and the emperor would be out of the question. You've never gone into the subject of your feelings about this quite thoroughly with me, and I do wish I knew precisely what you hope for from him, what you will consider the the keystone of the situation."

"Only for him to say that he loves me," Virginia confessed. "If I'm right. If I've brought something new into his life, something which has shown him that his heart's as important as his head, then there will come a moment when he can keep silence no longer, when he'll be forced to say, 'I love you, dear,' and because we can't belong to each other day is turned into night for me. Then when that moment comes the tide of my fortune will be at its flood. I shall tell him that I love him, and I shall tell him all the truth."

"You'll tell him who we really are?"

"Yes, and why. I've been wondering lately that it was because, even since I was a little girl, he'd been the one man in the world for me. Because when our marriage was suggested through official channels I made up my mind that I must win him first through, love or live single all our days."

"What if he should be vexed at the deception and refuse to receive you? You know, darling, we shall be in a rather ridiculous position when anything comes out, as we have heads all our friends have known we are Miss Mowbray. Of course, the chance is what we did. I'm very, very sorry, but it's too late now. We've been, we have been, we shall be, we must be, we must be, we must