

two men were wanted the chauffeur started noiselessly and swiftly.

Both windows were closed to keep out the chill of the night air, but soon Leopold impatiently lowered one, forgetting the chancellor's old-fashioned hatred of drafts, and stared into the night. Already they were approaching the outskirts of the great town, and, flying past the dark warehouses and factories of the neighborhood, they sped toward the open country.

The weather, still warm the evening before—that evening of moonlight not to be forgotten—had turned cold with morning, and tonight there was a pungent scent of dying leaves in the air. It smote Leopold in the face with the wind of emotion, and it seemed to him the essential perfume of sadness. Never again would he inhale that fragrance of the falling year without recalling this hour.

He was half mad with impatience to reach the end of the journey and confront the chancellor once for all, yet as the swift electric carriage spun smoothly along the white road and landmark after landmark vanished behind tree branches laced with stars something within him would at last have stayed the flying moments had that been possible. He turned to ask questions of Von Breitenstein, yet would have died rather than utter them.

It was a relief to the emperor when after a long silence his companion spoke, though a relief which carried with it a prick of resentment. Even the chancellor had no right to speak first without permission from his sovereign.

"Forgive me, your majesty," the old man said. "Your anger is hard to bear, yet I hear it uncomplainingly because of my confidence that the reward is not far off. I look for it no further in the future than tonight."

"I, too, believe that you won't miss your reward," returned the emperor sharply.

"I shall have it, I am sure, not only in your majesty's forgiveness, but in your thanks."

"I'll forgive you when you've asked my pardon for your suspicions and when you've found Miss Mowbray for me."

"I have already found her and am taking you to her now."

"Then you actually believe in your own story? You believe that this sweet and beautiful young girl is a fast actress, a schemer, a friend of your notoriously gallant friend and willing to risk her reputation by paying a late visit unchaperoned to him at his hunting lodge in the woods? You are, after all, a very poor judge of character if you dream that we shall see her there."

"I shall see her, your majesty, and you will see her unless the madness you call love has blinded the eyes of your body as well as the eyes of your mind. That she is now at the lodge I know, for the prince assured me with his own eyes that she had promised to motor out alone with him and dine."

"You mean he told you that his friend the actress had promised. I'll stake my life even he didn't dare to say Miss Mowbray."

"He said Miss Brett, the actress, it's true, but when he called upon her at her hotel, where he and I met to discuss a matter which is no secret to your majesty, he asked for Miss Mowbray. And the message that came down I heard. It was that Miss Mowbray would be delighted to see his royal highness. This left no doubt in my mind that after giving out that she would leave today the lady had remained in Kronburg for the express purpose of meeting her dear friend the prince, the handsomest and best dressed young man in Europe, after your majesty, of course. And it was quite natural for her to hope that, as she was supposed to be gone and you were following her, this evening's escapade would never be discovered."

"Please spare me your deductions, chancellor," said the emperor curtly, and pray understand now, if you have not understood before, that I am with you in this expedition not to prove you right, but wrong, and nothing you can say will convince me that the prince's mistress and Miss Mowbray are one. If we find a woman at the hunting lodge it will not be the lady we seek unless she has been kidnaped, and as you will presently be obliged to out every word you've spoken for yourself to swallow the better."

Thus snubbed by the young man whom he had held in his arms, an imperious as well as an imperial infant, the old statesman sought sanctuary in silence. But he had said that which had been in his mind to say, and he was satisfied. Meekness was not his métier, yet he could play the part of the faithful servant, humbly loyal through injustice and misunderstanding, and he played it now, because he knew it to be the one effective role. He sat beside the emperor with bowed head and stooping shoulders which suggested the weakness of old age, his hands clasped before him, and from time to time he sighed patiently.

As they glided under the dark arch of the Buchenwald Leopold spoke again.

"You have led me to suppose that our call at the hunting lodge will be a

surprise visit to the prince. That is the case, isn't it?"

Count von Breitenstein would have preferred that the question had not been asked. He had intended to convey the impression which the emperor had received, but he had not clothed it to actual statement. Luckily the prince was as clever as he was good looking, and he could be trusted as an actor; otherwise the old man would have been still more reluctant to commit himself.

"Were our visit expected we should not be likely to find the lady," said he. "The prince and I are on such friendly terms, your majesty, that he didn't mind confessing he was to have a pretty actress as his guest. He also answered a few questions I asked concerning her freely and frankly, for to do so he had to tell me only what the world knows. How could he dream that the flirtations or the visits of a Miss Jenny Brett could be of the slightest importance to the emperor of Rhaetia? Had he guessed, however, that the entertainment he meant to offer her might be interrupted naturally, he would have taken some means to protect her from annoyance."

"This night's work will give him cause to pick a private quarrel with me if he likes," said the emperor, convinced of the chancellor's good faith.

"I don't think he will choose, your majesty. You are in a mood to be glad if he did, I fear. But, no; I need not fear. You will always remember Rhaetia and pug her interests before your own wishes."

"You weren't as confident of that a few hours ago."

"Even then I knew that when the real test should be applied your majesty's cool head would triumph over the hot impulse of youth. But, see; we're passing through the village of Inseleden, fast asleep already, every window dark. In six or seven minutes at this speed we shall be at the lodge."

The emperor laughed shortly. "Add another seven minutes to your first seven and we shall be out of the lodge again, with Chancellor von Breitenstein a sadder and a wiser man than he went in."

Meekness was once more the part for the old man to play, and, raising his hands, palm upward, in a gesture of generous indulgence for his young sovereign, he denied himself the pleasure of retort.

The hunting lodge in the wood, now the property of the chancellor's accommodating young friend, had until recently belonged to a Rhaetian semi-royal prince who had been compelled by lack of sympathy among his creditors to sell something and had promptly sold the thing he cared for least. The present owner was a keen sportsman and, though he came seldom to the place, had spent a good deal of money in repairing the quaint rustic house.

Years had passed since the emperor had done more than pass the lodge gates, and now the outlines of the low rambling structure looked strange to him silhouetted against a spangled sky. He was glad of this, for he had spent some joyous days here as a boy, and he wished to separate the old impressions and the new.

Two tall chimneys stood up like the pricked ears of some alert crouching animal. The path to the lodge gleamed

white and straight in the darkness as a pathing in the rough black hair of a giant. The trees whispered gossip to each other in the wind, and it seemed to Leopold that they were evil things telling lies and slandering his love. He hated them and their rustling, which once he had loved; he hated the yellow eyes of the animal with the pricked ears, glittering eyes which were lighted windows; he hated the young prince who owned the place, and he would have hated the chancellor more than all had not the old man thumped as he walked up the path, showing how heavy was the burden of his years as he had never shown it to his emperor before.

The path led to a hooded entrance, and ascending the two stone steps, the chancellor lifted the muffled glove which hid duty as a knocker. Twice he brought it down on the oak panel underneath, and the sound of metal smiting against wood went echoing through the house with an effect of emptiness and desolation.

Nobody came to answer the summons, and Leopold smiled in the darkness. He suspected it likely that even the prince was not at home. A practical joke had been played on the chancellor.

Again the muffled fist struck the panel. An echo alone replied. Count von Breitenstein began to be at rimed for the success of his plan. He thanked the night which hid from the keen eyes of the emperor—cynical now, no doubt—the telltale vein beating hard in his forehead.

"Don't you think, chancellor, that after all, you'd better try to take me to some more probable as well as more suitable place to look for Miss Mowbray?" he suggested, with a drawl intended to be as aggravating as it actually was. "There doesn't appear to be any one about. Even the caretakers are out courting perhaps."

"But listen, your majesty," said Von Breitenstein when he knocked again.

Leopold did listen and heard the ring of a bell on a floor of stone or marble.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It was a jager clad in green who opened the door of the hunting lodge and gazed apparently without recognition at the two men standing in the dark embrasure of the porch.

"We wish to see his royal highness, your master," said the chancellor, taking the initiative, as he knew the emperor would wish him to do.

"His royal highness is not at home, sir," replied the jager.

Leopold's eyes lightened as he threw a glance of sarcastic meaning at his companion, but Iron Heart was un-



"His imperial majesty the emperor"

daunted. He knew very well now that this was only a prelude to the drama which would follow, and, though he had suffered a sharp pang of anxiety at first, he saw that his royal friend was playing with commendable realism. Naturally when beautiful young actresses ventured into the forest unchaperoned to dine with fascinating princes the least that such favored gentlemen could do was to be "not at home" to an intrusive public.

"You are mistaken," insisted the chancellor. "His royal highness is at home and will receive us. It will be better for you to admit us without further delay."

Under the domination of those eyes, which could quell a turbulent reeling, the jager weakened, as his master had doubtless expected him to do after the first resistance.

"It may be I have made a mistake, sir," he stammered, "though I do not think so. If you will have the kindness to walk in and wait for a few minutes until I can inquire whether his royal highness has come home or will come home."

"That is not necessary," said the chancellor. "His royal highness dines here this evening. We will go with you to the door of the dining room, which you will open for us and announce that two gentlemen wish to see him."

With this all uncertainty in the mind of the jager was swept away. He knew his duty and determined to stand by it, and the chancellor saw that if the master had given instructions meaning them to be overridden at least the servant was sincere. He put himself in the doorway and looked an obstacle difficult to dislodge.

"That is impossible, sir," he exclaimed. "I have had my orders, which are that his royal highness is not at home tonight, and until I know whether or not those orders are to stand nobody, not if it were the emperor, should force his way."

"Fool, those orders are not for us, but it is the emperor who will go in." With a step aside the chancellor let the light from the hanging lamp in the hall shine full upon Leopold's face, hitherto masked in shadow.

His count forgotten, the jager uttered a cry of dismay, and, with a sudden falling of the knees, he moved and hid the doorway free.

"Your majesty," he faltered, "I did not see—I could not know. Most humbly I beg your majesty's gracious pardon. If your majesty will but hold me blameless with my master!"

"Never mind yourself, and never mind your master," broke in the chancellor. "Open that door at the end of the hall and announce the emperor and Count von Breitenstein."

The unfortunate jager, approaching a state of collapse, obeyed. The door of the dining room, which Leopold knew of old, was thrown open, and a quavering voice heralded "His imperial majesty the emperor and the Herr Chancellor Count von Breitenstein."

The scene disclosed was as unreal to Leopold's eyes as a painted picture—the walls of pompeian red, the gold candelabra, the polished floor spread with the glimmering fur of polar bears and in the center a flower decked table lit with pink shaded lights and sparkling with gold and crystal, springing up from a chair which faced the door, a young man in evening

dress; sitting motionless, her back half turned, a slender girl in bridal white.

At sight of her the emperor stopped on the threshold. All the blood in his body seemed rushing to his head, then surging back upon his heart.

The impossible had happened.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE prince came forward. "What a delightful surprise!" he said. "How good of you both to look me up! But I wish my prophetic soul had warned me to keep back dinner. We have just reached the third course." And his eyes met the chancellor's.

"All the same," he went on, "I beg that you will honor me by dining. Everything can be ready in a moment, and the bisque eccrevisse!"

"Thank you," cut in the emperor. "We cannot dine." His voice came hoarsely, as if a fierce hand pinched his throat. "Our call is purely one of business and a moment will see it finished. We owe you an explanation for this intrusion." He paused. All his calculations were upset by the chancellor's triumph, for to plan beforehand what he should do if he found Helen Mowbray dining here alone with the prince would have been to insult her. His campaign had been arranged in the event of the chancellor's defeat.

Now the one course he saw open before him was frankness.

To look at the girl and meet guilt or defiance in her eyes would be agony; therefore he would not look, though he saw her, and her alone, as he stood gazing with a strained fixedness at the prince.

He knew that she had risen not in frightened haste, but with a leasured and dainty dignity. Now her face was turned to him. He felt it as a blind man may feel the rising of the sun.

He wished that she had died before this moment; that they had both died last night in the garden while he held her in his arms and their hearts beat together. She had told him then that she loved him, yet she was here with this man—here of her own free will, the same girl he had worshiped as a goddess in the white moonlight twenty-four hours ago.

The thought was hot in his heart as the searing touch of iron red from the fire—the same girl!

His blood sang in his ears a song of death, and for an instant all was black around him. He groped in black chaos where there was neither light nor hope, and duly he was conscious of the chancellor's voice saying, "Your majesty, if you are satisfied, would you not rather go?"

Then the dark spell broke. Light showered over him as from a golden fountain, for in spite of himself he had met the girl's eyes—the same eyes, because she was the same girl—sweet eyes, pure and innocent and wistfully appealing.

"My God!" he cried. "Tell me why you are here, and whatever you may say I will believe you, in spite of all and through all, because you are you, and I know that you can do no wrong."

"Your majesty!" exclaimed the chancellor. But the emperor did not hear. With a broken exclamation that was half a sob the girl held out both her hands, and Leopold sprang forward to crush them between his ice-cold palms.

"Thank heaven!" she faltered. "You are true! You've stood the test. I love you."

"At last, then, I can introduce you to my sister Virginia," said the crown prince of Hungary, with a great sigh of relief for the ending of his difficult part.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

THEY were alone together. Adalbert and Count von Breitenstein had stolen from the room and had ceased to exist so far as Leopold and Virginia were concerned.

"I'll tell you now why I'm here and everything else," she was saying, but the emperor stopped her.

"Ever since I came to myself I wanted an explanation," he said. "I want only you. That is all I want now. I am the happiest man in the universe."

Why should I ask? I came by my happiness? Virginia! It's a more beautiful name even than Helen."

"But listen," she pleaded, "there are some things—just a few things—that I long to tell you. Please let me. Last night I wished to go into a convent. Oh, it was because I loved you so much! I wanted you to seem perfect as my hero of romance, just as you were already perfect as an emperor. To think that I should have been far away out of Rhaetia by this time if Miss Portman hadn't been ill! Dear Miss Portman! Maybe if we'd gone nothing would ever have come right. Who can say?"

"You know, my brother came to our hotel this afternoon. When his card arrived we couldn't tell whether he

knew our secret or not, but when we had let him come up we had only to see his face of surprise. He was angry, too, as well as surprised, for he blurted out that there were all sorts of horrid suspicions against us, and mother explained everything to him before I could have stopped her even if I would—how I had not wanted to accept you unless you could learn to love me for myself and then how I had been disappointed. No, don't speak; that's all over now. You've more than atoned, a thousand times more."

Dal explained things, too, then—very different things—about a plan of the chancellor's to disgust you with me and how he (Dal) had played into the chancellor's hands because, you see, he thought he was acting wisely for his neglected sister's sake and because he had really supposed an actress he knows was masquerading as Miss Mowbray. Very imprudently he'd told her that some day there might be something between you and his sister. She knew quite well, too, that the real Mowbrays were our cousins; so, you see, as she and he have quarreled, it might have been an easy and clever way for an unscrupulous woman to take revenge. Dal would have gone and perhaps have said dreadful things to the chancellor, who was waiting downstairs for news, but I begged him not. From being the saddest girl in the world I'd suddenly become the happiest, for the chancellor had told Dal and Dal had told me that you had followed Helen Mowbray to ask her to be the empress. That changed everything, for then I knew you really loved her, but just to punish you for what I suffered through you last night I longed to put you to one more test. I said: 'Let the chancellor carry out his plot. Let me go with you to your hunting lodge.' At first Dal wouldn't consent, but when I begged him he did, for generally I can get my way with people. I warn you."

"That's all, except that I hadn't realized how severe the test would be until you came in and I saw the look in your eyes. It was a dagger of ice in my heart. I prayed heaven to make you believe in me without a word. Oh, how I prayed through all that dreadful moment and how I looked at you, saying with my eyes, 'I love you; I am true.' If you had failed me then it would have killed me, but—"

"There could be no but," the emperor broke in. "To doubt is not to love. When a man loves he knows. Even out of darkness a light comes and tells him."

"Then you forgive me—for tonight, and for everything, from the beginning?"

"Forgive you?"

"And if I'd been different, more like other girls, content with a conventional affection, you wouldn't have loved me more?"

He took her in his arms and held her as if he would never let her go.

"If you had been different I wouldn't have loved you at all," he said. "But if things had been different I couldn't have helped loving you just the same. I should have been fated to fall in love with Princess Virginia of Haumenburg-Drippe at first sight, exactly as I fell in love with Helen Mowbray."

"Ah, but at best you'd have fallen in love with Virginia because it was



"We shall never be old," your duty, and you fell in love with Helen Mowbray because it was your duty not to, which makes it so much nicer."

"It was no question of duty, but of destiny," said the emperor. "The stars ordained that I should love you."

"Then I wish," and Virginia laughed happily, as she could afford to laugh now, "that the stars had told me last summer. It would have saved me a great deal of trouble. And yet I don't know," she added thoughtfully. "It's been a wonderful adventure. We shall often talk of it when we're old."

"We shall never be old, for we love each other," said the emperor.

THE END.

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