

The Princess Virginia

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

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

LRON HEART was dressed in the long double-breasted gray overcoat and the soft gray hat in which all snapshot photographs (no others had ever been taken) showed the chancellor of Rhaetia.

At eight of the emperor ordered came the famous hat, baring the bald dome of the fine old head, fringed with hair of curiously mingled black and white.

"Good day, your majesty," he said, with no sign of surprise in his voice or face.

The train rocked going around a curve, and it was with difficulty that the chancellor kept his footing. But he stood rigidly erect, supporting himself in the doorway until the emperor, with more politeness than enthusiasm, invited him to enter and be seated.

"I'm glad you're well enough to travel, chancellor," said Leopold. "We had none too encouraging an account of you from Captain von Breitenstein."

"I travel because you travel, your majesty," replied the old man. "It is kind of you to tolerate me here, and I appreciate it."

Now they sat facing each other, and the young man, fighting down a sense of guilt, familiar to him in boyish days when about to be taken to task by the chancellor, gazed fixedly at the hard, clever face on which the afternoon sun scored the detail of each wrinkle.

"Indeed!" was the emperor's only answer.

"Your majesty, I have served you and your father before you well, I hope—faithfully, I know. I think you trust me."

"No man more. But this sounds a portentous preface. Is it possible you imagine it necessary to 'lead up' to a subject if I can please myself by doing you a favor?"

"If I have seemed to lead up to what I wish to say, your majesty, it is only for the sake of explanation. You are wondering, no doubt, how I knew you would travel today and in this train; also why I have ventured to follow. Your intention I learned by accident." The chancellor did not explain by what diplomacy that "accident" had been brought about. "Wishing much to talk over with you a pressing matter that should not be delayed, I took this liberty and seized this opportunity."

"Some men would in my place pretend that business of their own had brought them and that the train had been chosen by chance. But your majesty knows me as a blunt man when I serve him not as diplomat, but as friend. I'm not one to work in the dark with those who trust me, and I want your majesty to know the truth."

(Which perhaps he did, but not the whole truth.)

"Your raise my curiosity," said Leopold.

"Then have I your indulgence to speak frankly not entirely as a humble subject to his emperor, but as an old man to a young man."

"I'd have you speak as a friend," said Leopold. But a slight constraint hardened his voice as he prepared himself for something disagreeable.

"I've had a letter from the crown prince of Hungary. It has come to his ears that there is a certain reason for your majesty's delay in following up the first overtures for an alliance with his family. Malicious tongues have whispered that your majesty's attentions are otherwise engaged, and the young Adalbert has addressed me in a friendly way, begging that the rumor may be contradicted or confirmed."

"I'm not sure that negotiations had gone far enough to give him the right to be inquisitive," returned Leopold, flushing.

The chancellor spread out his old veined hands in a gesture of appeal. "I fear," he said, "that in my anxiety for your majesty's welfare and the good of Rhaetia I may have exceeded my instructions. My one excuse is that I believed your mind to be definitely made up. I still believe it to be so. I would listen to no one who should try to persuade me of the contrary, and I will write Adalbert."

"You must get yourself and me out of the scrape as best you can, since you admit you got us into it," broke in the emperor, with an uneasy laugh. "If Princess Virginia of Baumenberg-Drippe is as charming as she is said to be, her difficulty will be in choosing a husband, not in getting one. For once, my dear chancellor, gossip has told the truth, and I wouldn't pay the princess so poor a compliment as to ask for her hand when I've no heart left to give her in exchange for it. There's some one else!"

"It is of that some one else I would venture to speak, your majesty. Gossip has named her. May I?"

"I'll save you the trouble, for I'm not ashamed that the common fate has overtaken me—common because every man loves once before he dies, and yet uncommon because no man ever loved a woman so worthy. Chancellor, there's no woman in the world

like Miss Helen Mowbray, the lady to whom I owe my life."

"It's natural you should be grateful, your majesty, but—"

"It's natural I should be in love."

"Natural that a young man inexperienced in affairs of the heart should mistake warm gratitude for love, impossible that the mistake should be allowed to continue."

Leopold's eyes grew dark. "In such a connection," he said, "it would be better not to mention the word 'mistake.' I'm glad you are here, for now you can learn from me my intentions toward that lady."

"Intentions, did you say, your majesty? I fear I grow hard of hearing."

"At least you will never grow slow of understanding. I did speak of my intentions toward Miss Mowbray."

"You would give the lady some magnificent estate, some splendid acknowledgment?"

"Whether splendid or not would be a matter of opinion," laughed the emperor. "I shall offer her a present of myself."

The old man had been sitting with his chin sunk into his short neck, peering down from under his brows in a way he had, but he lifted his head suddenly, with a look in his eyes like that of an animal who scents danger from an unexpected quarter.

"Your majesty," he exclaimed, "you are your father's son, you are Rhaetian, and your standard of honor!"

"I hope to marry Miss Mowbray," Leopold cut him short.

The chancellor's jaw dropped, and he grew pale. "I had dreamed of nothing as bad as this," he blurted out, with no thought or wish to sugar the truth. "I feared a young man's rashness. I dreaded scandal. But, forgive me, your majesty. For you a morganatic marriage would be madness!"

"A morganatic marriage I did think of at first, but on second thoughts I saw it would be ungrateful."

"Ah, yes, to the country which expects so much of you."

"No, to the woman who has the right to all or nothing. I will make her empress of Rhaetia."

With a cry the chancellor sprang up. His eyes glared like the eyes of a bull who receives the death stroke. His working lips and the hollow sound in his throat alarmed the emperor.

"No, your majesty, no!" he panted. "But I say yes," Leopold answered, "and let no man give me nay. I've thought it all out. I will make her a countess first. Then she shall be made my empress."

"Your majesty, it is not possible." "Take care, chancellor."

"She has been deceiving you. She has neither the birth, the position nor the name she claims to have, and I can prove it."

"You are mad, Von Breitenstein," the emperor flung at him. "That can be your only excuse for such words."

"I am not mad, but I am old and wise, your majesty. Today you have made me feel that I am very old. Punish me as you will for my frankness. My work for you and yours is nearly done. Cheerfully will I submit to my dismissal if only this last effort in your service may save the ship of state from wreck. I would not make an accusation which I could not prove. And I can prove that the two English ladies who have been staying at Schloss Lyndalberg are not the persons they pretend to be."

"Who has been lying to you?" cried Leopold, who held between clenched hands the temper he vowed not to lose with this old man.

"To me, no one. To your majesty, to society in Kronburg, two adventuresses have lied."

The emperor caught his breath. "If you were a young man I would kill you for that," he said.

"I know you would. As it is, my life is yours. But before you take it, for God's sake, for your father's sake, hear me out!"

Leopold did not speak for a moment, but stared at the vanishing landscape, which he saw through a red haze.

"Very well," he said at last; "I will hear you, because I fear nothing you can say."

"When I heard of your majesty's admiration for a certain lady," the chancellor began quickly lest the emperor should change his mind, "I looked for her name and her mother's in Burke's Peerage. There I found Lady Mowbray, widow of a dead baron of that ilk, mother of a son still a child and of one daughter, a young woman with many names and twenty-eight years."

"This surprised me, as the Miss Mowbray I had seen at the birthday ball looked no more than eighteen and I was told, confessed to twenty. The Mowbrays, I learned by a little further research in Burke, were distantly connected by marriage with the family of Baumenberg-Drippe. This seemed an odd coincidence in the circumstances. But, acting as duty bade me act, I wired to two persons—Baron von Sark, your majesty's ambassador to Great Britain, and the crown prince of Hungary, the brother of Princess Virginia."

"What did you telegraph?" asked the emperor icily.

"Nothing compromising to your majesty, you may well believe. I inquired of Adalbert if he had English relations, a Lady Mowbray and daughter, Helen, traveling in Rhaetia, and I begged that if so he would describe their appearance by telegram. To Von Sark I said that particulars by wire concerning the widow of Lord Mowbray and daughter, Helen, would put me under personal obligation. Both these messages I sent off night before last. Yesterday I received Adalbert's answer, and the chancellor tapped the breast of his gray coat. "Will your majesty read them?"

"If you wish," replied Leopold at his haughtiest and coldest.

The old man unbuttoned his coat and

produced a coroneted pocketbook, a souvenir of friendship on his last birthday from the emperor. Leopold saw it and remembered, as the chancellor hoped he would.

"Here are the telegrams, your majesty," he said. "The first one is from the crown prince of Hungary."

"Have no idea where Lady Mowbray and daughter are traveling; may be Rhaetia or north pole," Adalbert had written, with characteristic flippancy. "Have seen neither for eight years and scarcely know them. But Lady M. tall, brown old party, with nose like hobbyhorse; Helen dark, nose like mother's, wears glasses."

"With no betrayal of feeling, Leopold laid the telegram on the red plush seat and unfolded the other."

"Pardon delay," the Rhaetian ambassador's message began. "Have been making inquiries. Lady Mowbray has been widow for ten years. Not rich. During son's minority has let her town and country houses. Lives much abroad. Very high church, intellectual, at present in Calcutta, where daughter Helen, twenty-eight, not pretty, is lately engaged to marry middle aged judge of some distinction."

"So"—and the emperor threw aside the second bit of paper—"It is on such slight grounds as these that a man of the world can label two ladies 'adventuresses.'"

The chancellor was bitterly disappointed. He had counted on the impression which these telegrams must make, and unless Leopold were acting driven him out of his senses.

But if the emperor were mad he must be treated accordingly, and the old statesman condescended to "bluff."

"There is still more to tell," he said, "if your majesty has not heard enough, but I think when you have reflected you will not wish for more. It is clear that the women calling themselves Mowbrays have had the audacity to present themselves here under false colors. They have either deceived Lady Lambert, who introduced them to Rhaetian society, or, still more likely, they have cleverly forged their letters of introduction."

"Why didn't you telegraph to Lady Lambert while your hand was in?" sneered Leopold.

"I did, your majesty, or, rather, not knowing her present address, I wired a friend of mine, an acquaintance of hers, begging him to make inquiries without using my name, but I have not yet received an answer to that telegram."

"Until you do I should think that even a cynic like yourself might give two defenseless, inoffensive ladies the benefit of the doubt."

"Inoffensive," echoed Von Breitenstein—"inoffensive when they came to this country to ensure your majesty through the girl's beauty! But, great heaven, it is true that I am growing old! I have forgotten to ask your majesty whether you have gone so far as to mention the word marriage to Miss Mowbray?"

"I'll answer that question by another. Do you really believe that Miss Mowbray came to Rhaetia to 'entrap' me?"

"I do, though I scarcely think that even her ambition flew as high as you are encouraging it to soar."

"In case you're right she would have been overjoyed with an offer of morganatic marriage."

"Overjoyed is a poor word. Overwhelmed might be nearer."

"Yet I tell you she refused me last night and is leaving Rhaetia today rather than listen to further entreaties."

Leopold bent forward to launch his thunderbolt, his brown hands on his knees, his eyes eager. The memories, half bitter, half sweet, called up by his own words caused Virginia to appear more beautiful, more desirable, ever than before.

He was delighted with the expression of the chancellor's face. "Now, what arguments have you left?" he broke out in the brief silence.

"All I had before and many new ones, for what your majesty has said shows the lady more ambitious, more astute, therefore more dangerous, than I had guessed. She staked everything on the power of her charms, and she might have won had you not an old servant who wouldn't be fooled by the wily tricks of a fair Helen."

"She has won," said Leopold, then quickly: "God forgive me for chiming in with your bitter humor, as if she'd played a game. By simply being herself she has won me, such as I am. She's proved that if she cares at all it's for the man and not the emperor, since she called the offer you think so magnificent an insult. Yes, chancellor, that was the word she used, and it was almost the last she said to me, which is the reason I'm traveling today. And none of your boasted 'proofs' can hold me back."

"By heaven, your majesty must look upon yourself from the point of view you credit to the girl. You forget the emperor in the man."

"The two need not be separated."

"Love indeed makes men blind and spares not the eyes of emperors."

"I've pledged myself to bear with you, chancellor."

"And I know you'll keep your word. I must speak for Rhaetia and your better self. You are following this lady to give her your empire for a toy."

"She must first accept the emperor as her husband."

"A lady who has so poor a name of her own that she steals one which doesn't belong to her—the nation won't bear it."

"You speak for yourself, not for Rhaetia," said Leopold. "Though I'm not so old as you by half your years, I believe I can judge my people better than you do. The law which bids an emperor of Rhaetia match with royalty is an unwritten law, a law solely of customs handed down through the generations. I'll not spurn my life by submitting to its yoke, since by breaking it the nation gains, as I do. I could go to the world's end and not find a woman as worthy to be my wife and empress of Rhaetia as Helen Mowbray."

"You have never seen Princess Virginia."

"I've no wish to see her. There's but one woman for me, and I swear to you if I lose her I'll go to my grave unmarried. Let the crown fall to my uncle's son. I'll not perjure myself even for Rhaetia."

The chancellor bowed his head and held up his hands, for by that gesture alone could he express his despair.

"If my people love me they'll love my wife and rejoice in my happiness," Leopold went on sharply. "If they complain, why, we shall see who's master—whether or not the emperor of Rhaetia is a mere figurehead. In some countries royalty is but an ornamental survival of a picturesque past; a king or queen is a mere puppet which the nation loads with luxury to do itself honor. That's not true of Rhaetia, though, as I'm ready to prove, if prove it I must. But I believe I shall be spared the trouble. We Rhaetians love romance—you are perhaps the one exception—while, as for the story you've told me, I would not give that for it!" And the emperor snapped his fingers.

"You still believe the ladies have a right to the name of Mowbray?"

"I believe that they are of stainless reputation and that any seeming mystery can be explained. Miss Mowbray is herself. That's enough for me. Perhaps, chancellor, there are two Lady Mowbrays."

"Only one is mentioned in Burke."

"Burke isn't gospel."

"Pardon me. It's the gospel of the British peerage. It can no more be guilty of error than Euclid."

"Nor can Miss Mowbray be guilty of wrong. I should still stake my life on that even had your conclusions not been lame ones."

The old man accepted this rebuff in silence. But it was not the silence of absolute hopelessness; it was only such a pause as a prize fighter makes between rounds.

"Your majesty will not be in too great haste, at all events, I trust," he said at last—"at least a little reflection, a little patience, to cool the blood. I have not laid down all my cards yet."

"It's often bad policy not to lead trumps," replied Leopold.

"Often, but not always. Time and the end of the play will show. Is your majesty's indulgence for the old man quite exhausted?"

"Not quite, though rather strained, I confess," Leopold tempered his words with a faint smile.

"Then I have one more important question to ask, venturing to remind you first that I have acted solely in your interest. If such a step as you contemplate should be my deathblow it is because of my love for you and Rhaetia. Tell me, your majesty, this one thing. If it were proved to you that the lady you know as Miss Mowbray was not only not the person she pretends to be, but in all other respects unworthy of your love, what would you do?"

"You speak of impossibilities."

"But if they were not impossibilities?"

"In such a case I should do as other men do—spend the rest of my life in trying to forget a lost ideal."

"I thank your majesty. That is all I ask. I suppose you will continue your journey?"

"Yes, as far as Feigarde, where I hope to find Lady Mowbray and her daughter."

"Then, your majesty, when I've expressed my gratitude for your forbearance, even though I've failed to be convincing, I'll trouble you no longer."

The chancellor rose painfully, with a reminiscence of gout, and Leopold stared at him in surprise. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Only that, as I can do no further good here, with your permission I will get out at the station we are coming to and go back home again."

The emperor realized what he had not noticed until this moment—that the train was slackening speed as it approached the suburbs of a town. His conversation with the chancellor had lasted for an hour, and he was far from regretting the prospect of being left in peace. More than once he had come perilously near to losing his temper, forgetting his gratitude and the old man's years. How much longer he could have held out under a continued strain of provocation he did not know. So he spoke no word of disapproval when Count von Breitenstein picked up his soft hat and buttoned his gray coat for departure.

"I've passed pleasant hours in your society, I admit," said Leopold when the train stopped. "But I can thank you for your motives, if not your maxims, and here's my hand."

"It would be most kind of your majesty to telephone me from Feigarde," the chancellor exclaimed, as if on a sudden thought, while they shook hands, "merely to say whether you remain there or whether you go farther or whether you return at once. I am too fatigued to travel back immediately to Schloss Breitenstein and shall rest for some hours at least in my house at Kronburg, so a call will find me there."

"I will do as you ask," said the emperor. Again he pressed the chancellor's hand, and it was very cold.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

WHEN Leopold arrived at Feigarde he went immediately to the hotel which he had designated as a place of meeting. But no ladies answering to the description he gave had been seen there.

He returned at once to the railway station.

The telegram was still in the hands of the station master, to whose care it had been addressed. This diligent person professed to have sent a man through the Orient express from end to end calling for Miss Helen Mowbray, but calling in vain. He had no theory more plausible to offer than that the lady had not started from Kronburg or else that she had left the train at Feigarde before her name had been cried. But certainly she would not have had time to go far if she were a through passenger, for the Orient express stopped but ten minutes at Feigarde.

It was evident throughout the short conversation that the excellent official was on pins and needles. Struck by the emperor's features, which he had so often seen in painting and photograph, it still seemed impossible that the greatest man in Rhaetia could be traveling thus about the country in ordinary morning dress and unattended.

Sure at one instant that he must be talking with the emperor, sure the next that he had been deceived by a likeness, the poor fellow struggled against his confusion in a way that would have amused Leopold in a different mood.

With a manner that essayed the different mean between reverence due to royalty and common everyday politeness, good enough for an ordinary gentleman, the station master volunteered to ascertain whether the ladies described had gone out and given up their tickets. A few minutes of suspense dragged on. Then came the news that no such persons had passed.

Here was a stumbling block. Since Helen Mowbray and her mother had apparently not traveled by the Orient express, where had they gone on leaving the hotel at Kronburg? Had they, after all, misled Baroness von Lyndal as to their intentions for the purpose of blinding the emperor, or had they simply changed their minds at the last minute, as women may? Could it be possible that they had changed them so completely as to return to Schloss Lyndalberg, or had they chosen to vanish mysteriously through some back door out of Rhaetia, leaving no trace which even a lover could find?

Leopold could not help recalling the chancellor's revelations, but dismissed them as soon as they had crept into his brain. No matter where the clew to the tangle might lie, he told himself that it was not in any act of which Helen Mowbray need be ashamed.

He could think of nothing more to do but to go dismally back to Kronburg and await developments or, rather, to stir them up by every means in his power. This was the course he finally chose, and just as he was about to act upon his decision he remembered his carelessly given promise to Count von Breitenstein.

There was a telephone in the railway station at Feigarde, and Leopold himself called up the chancellor at Kronburg.

"My friends are not here. I'm starting for Kronburg as soon as possible, either by the next train or by special," he announced after a faraway squeak had signified Count von Breitenstein's presence at the other end. "I don't see why you wish to know, but I would not break my promise; that's all. Goodbye. Eh? What was that you said?"

"I have a—curious—piece of news for you," came over the wire in the chancellor's voice. "It's—about the ladies."

"What is it?" asked Leopold.

"I hinted that I had more information which I could not give you then. But I am in a different position now. You did not find your friends in the Orient express."

"No," said the emperor.

"They gave out that they were leaving Rhaetia, but they haven't crossed the frontier."

"Thanks. That's exactly what I wanted to know."

"You remember a certain person whose name can't be mentioned over the telephone buying a hunting lodge near the village of Inseleden, in the Buchenwald, last year?"

"Yes; I remember very well. But what has that to do with my friends?"

"The younger lady has gone there without her mother, who remains in Kronburg with the companion. It seems that the present owner of the hunting lodge has been acquainted with them for some time, though he was ignorant of their masquerade. You see, he knows them only under their real name. The young lady is a singer in comic operas, a Miss Jenny Brett, whose dossier can be given you on demand. The owner of the hunting lodge arrived at his place this morning, motored into Kronburg, where the young lady had waited, evidently informed of his coming. She invited him to pay her a visit at her hotel. He accepted and returned the invitation, which she accepted."

"You are misinformed. The lady was never an opera singer, and I'm certain she would neither receive the person you mention nor go to visit him."

"Will you drive out to the lodge to-night when you reach Kronburg and honor the gentleman with an unexpected call?"

"I will, d—n you, but not for the reason you think!" cried the emperor. It was the first time in his life that he had ever used strong language to the chancellor.

He dropped the receiver, flung down

a gold coin with his own head upon it (at the moment he could have wished that he had no other) and, waving away an offer of change, rushed out of the office.

Under his breath he swore again, the strongest oaths which the rich language of his fatherland provided, mathematizing not the beloved woman, maligned, but the man who maligned her.

There would be death in the thought that she could be false to herself and her confession of love for him. But, then, it was unthinkable. Let the whole world reek with foulness, his love must still shine above it white and remote as the young moon.

This old man, whose life would scarce have been safe if in his emper-

or's present mood the two had been together—this old man had a grudge against the one perfect girl on earth. There was no black rag of scandal he would not stoop to pick out of the mud and fly as a flag of battle, soothing his conscience—if he had one—by saying it was for "Rhaetia's good."

Telling himself that these things were truths, Leopold hurried away to inquire for the next train back to Kronburg. There would not be another for three hours, he found, and as nothing could have induced him to wait three hours, or even two, he ordered a special. There was a raging tiger in his breast which would not cease to tear him until he had seen Helen Mowbray, laid his empire at her feet, received her answer and, through it, punished the chancellor.

The special, he was told, could be ready in less than an hour. The journey to Kronburg would occupy nearly three hours, and it would be close upon 9 before he could start with Count von Breitenstein for the hunting lodge which he had promised to visit. But the chancellor would doubtless have his electric carriage ready for the desired expedition, and they could reach their destination in twenty minutes. This was not too long a time to give up to proving the old man wrong, for to do this, not to find Helen Mowbray, was Leopold's motive in consenting. She would not be there, and the emperor was going because she would not. He wanted to witness Von Breitenstein's confusion, for humiliation was the bitterest punishment which could possibly be inflicted on the proud and opinionated old man.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

TELL the truth when desired, spice with prevarication when necessary and never part with the whole truth at one time, since waste is sinful."

was one of the maxims by which the chancellor guided his own actions, though he did not give it away for the benefit of others, and he had made the most of that prudent policy today.

He had told his emperor no lies, even

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In an Emergency

Where many people dwell together, as in a family, scarcely a day or a week passes that some member of the family does not become constipated or has indigestion, sick headache, heartburn, flatulency, etc. It is then that you need a remedy like Dr. Caldwell's Syrup Pepsin, which cures these diseases. Every family should have a bottle always at hand. It is absolutely guaranteed to do what is claimed and if you want to try it before buying, send your address for a free sample bottle to Pepsin Syrup Co., 119 Caldwell Bldg., Monticello, Ill. It is sold by Hood Bros. at 50c and \$1 a bottle.

FOR THE PIANO OR ORGAN

With the Sweet Tone

See C. B. PAYLOR

And get the

KIMBALL