

The Princess Virginia

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CHAPTER SIX

LETTERS of introduction for Lady Mowbray and her daughter to influential and interesting persons attached to the Rhaetian court were necessarily a part of the wonderful plan concocted in the English garden, though they were among the details thought out afterward.

The widow of the hereditary Grand Duke of Baumburg-Drippe was reported in the journals of various countries to be traveling with the Princess Virginia and a small suit through Canada and the United States, and, fortunately for the success of the innocent plot, the grand duchess had spent so many years of seclusion in England and had even in her youth met so few Rhaetians that there was little fear of detection. Her objections to Virginia's scheme for winning a lover instead of thanking heaven quietly for a mere husband were based on other grounds, but Virginia had overcome them, and eventually the grand duchess had proved not only docile, but positively fertile in expedient.

The choosing of the borrowed flag under which to sail had at first been a difficulty. It was pointed out by a friend taken into their confidence, a lady whose husband had been ambassador to Rhaetia, that a real name and a name of some dignity must be adopted if proper introductions were to be given. And it was the grand duchess who suggested the game of Mowbray on the plea that she had in a way the right to annex it.

The mother of the late Duke of Northmoreland had been a Miss Mowbray, and there were still several eminently respectable, inconspicuous Mowbray cousins. Among these cousins was a certain Lady Mowbray, widow of a baron of that ilk and possessing a daughter some years older and innumerable degrees plainer than the Princess Virginia.

To this Lady Mowbray the grand duchess had gone out of her way to be kind in Germany long years ago, when she was a very grand personage indeed and Lady Mowbray comparatively a nobody. The humble connection had expressed herself as unspeakably grateful, and the two had kept up a friendship ever since. Therefore when the difficulty of realism in a name presented itself the grand duchess thought of Lady Mowbray and Miss Helen Mowbray. They were about to leave England for India, but had not yet left, and the widow of the baron was flattered as well as amused by the romantic confidence reposed in her by the widow of the grand duke. She was delighted to lend her name and her daughter's name, and who could blame the lady if her mind rushed forward to the time when she should have earned gratitude from the young empress of Rhaetia? For of course she had no doubt of the way in which the adventure would end.

As for the wife of the late British ambassador to the Rhaetian court, she was not sentimental and therefore was not quite as comfortably sure of the sequel. As far as concerned her own part in the plot, however, she felt safe enough, for, though she was after a fashion deceiving her old acquaintances at Kronburg, she was not foisting adventuresses upon them. On the contrary, she was giving them a chance of entertaining angels unawares by sending them letters to ladies who were in reality the Grand Duchess of Baumburg-Drippe and the Princess Virginia.

The four mysterious gentlemen left Alleheligen the day after Virginia's encounter with the chamois hunter. But the Mowbrays lingered on. The adventure had begun so gloriously that the girl feared an anticlimax for the next step. Though she longed for the second meeting, she dreaded it as well and put off the chance of it from day to day. The stay of the Mowbrays at Alleheligen lengthened into a week, and when they left at last it was only just in time for the great festivities at Kronburg which were to celebrate the emperor's thirty-first birthday, an event enhanced in national importance by the fact that the eighth anniversary of his coronation would fall on the same date.

On the morning of the journey the grand duchess had neuralgia and was frankly cross.

"I don't see, after all, what you've accomplished so far by this mad freak which has dragged us across Europe," she said fretfully in the train which they had taken at a town twenty miles from Alleheligen. "We've perched on a mountain top, like the ark on Ararat, for a week, freezing. The adventure you had there is only a complication. What have we to show for our trouble—unless incipient rheumatism?"

Virginia had nothing to show for it, at least nothing that she meant to show, even to her mother, but in a little scented bag of silk which lay next her heart was folded a bit of blotting paper. If you looked at its reflection in a mirror you saw written

twice over in a firm individual hand the name "Helen Mowbray."

The princess had found it on a table in the best sitting room after Frau Yornun had made that room ready for its new occupants. Therefore she loved Alleheligen; therefore she thought with rejoiced satisfaction of her visit there.

To learn her full name he must have thought it worth while to make inquiries. It had lingered in his thoughts or he would not have scrawled it twice on some bit of paper—since destroyed, no doubt—in a moment of idle dream-luz.

Through most of her life Virginia had known the lack of money, but she would not have exchanged a thousand pounds for the contents of that little bag.

Hohenlangenwald is the name of the house from which the rulers of Rhaetia sprang. Therefore everything in the beautiful city of Kronburg which can take the name of Hohenlangenwald has taken it, and it was at the Hohenlangenwald hotel that a suit of rooms had been engaged for Lady Mowbray.

The travelers broke the long journey at Melinabad, and Virginia's study of trains had timed their arrival in Kronburg for the morning of the birthday eve, early enough for the first ceremony of the festivities, the unveiling by the emperor of a statue of Rhaetia in the Leopoldplatz, directly in front of the Hohenlangenwald hotel.

Virginia looked forward to seeing the emperor from her own windows, as, according to her calculation, there was an hour to spare, but at the station they were told by the driver of the carriage sent to meet them that the crowd in the streets being already very great, he feared it would be a tedious undertaking to get through. Some of the thoroughfares were closed for traffic. He would have to go by a roundabout way and in any case could not reach the main entrance of the hotel. At best he would have to deposit his passengers and their luggage at a side entrance in a narrow street.

As the carriage started, from far away came a burst of martial music—a military band playing the national air which the chamois hunter had heard a girl sing behind a closed door at Alleheligen.

The shops were all shut, would be shut until the day after tomorrow, but their windows were unshuttered and gayly decorated to add to the brightness of the scene. Strange old shops displayed the marvelous chased silver, the jeweled weapons and gorgeous embroideries from the far eastern provinces of Rhaetia. Splendid new shops rivaled the best of the Rue de la Paix in Paris. Gray mediaeval buildings made wonderful backgrounds for drapery of crimson and blue and garlands of blazing flowers. Modern buildings of purple red porphyry and the famous honey yellow marble of Rhaetia fluttered with flags, and above all, in the heart of the town, between old and new, rose the Castle Rock. Virginia's pulses beat as she saw the home of Leopold for the first time, and she was proud of its picturesqueness, its richness and grandeur, as if she had some right in it too.

Ancient narrow streets and wide new streets were alike arbors of evergreen and brilliant blossoms. Prosperous citizens in their best, inhabitants of the poorer quarters and stalwart peasants from the country elbowed and pushed each other good naturedly as they streamed toward the Leopoldplatz. Handsome people they were, the girl thought, her heart warming to them and to her it seemed that the very air tingled with expectation. She believed that she could feel the magnetic thrill in it even if she were blind and deaf and could hear or see nothing of the excitement.

"We must be in time! We shall be in time!" she said to herself. "I shall lean out from my windows and see him."

But at the hotel, which they did finally reach, the girl had to bear a keen disappointment. With many apologies the landlord explained that he had done his very best for Lady Mowbray's party when he received their letter a fortnight before and that he had allotted them a good suit, with balconies overlooking the river at the back of the house—quite a Venetian effect, as her ladyship would find. But as to rooms at the front—impossible! All had been engaged fully six weeks in advance. One American millionaire was paying a thousand gulden solely for an hour's use of a small balcony, today for the unveiling and again tomorrow for the street procession. Virginia was pale with disappointment. "Then I'll go down into the crowd and take my chance of seeing something," she said to her mother when they had been shown into handsome rooms satisfactory in everything but situation. "I must hurry or there'll be no hope."

"My dear child, impossible for you to do such a thing!" exclaimed the grand duchess. "I can't think of allowing it. Fancy what a crush there will be—all sorts of creatures trampling on each other for places. Besides, you could see nothing."

"Oh, mother," pleaded the princess in her softest, sweetest voice, the voice she kept for extreme emergencies of cajoling. "I couldn't bear to stay shut up here while that music plays and the crowds shout themselves hoarse for my emperor. Besides, it's the most curious thing—I feel as if a voice kept calling to me that I must be there. Miss Portman and I'll take care of each other. You will let me go, won't you?"

Of course the grand duchess yielded, her one stipulation being that the two should keep close to the hotel, and the princess urged her reluctant companion away without waiting to hear her mother's last counsels.

Their rooms were on the first floor, and the girl turned eagerly down the

broad flight of marble stairs, Miss Portman following dutifully upon her heels.

They could not get out by way of the front door, for people had paid for standing room there and would not yield an inch, even for an instant, while the two or three steps below and the broad pavement in front were as closely blocked.

Matters began to look hopeless, but Virginia would not be daunted. They tried the side entrance and found it free, the street into which it led being comparatively empty, but just beyond, where it ran into the great open square of the Leopoldplatz, there was a solid wall of sightseers.

"We might as well go back," said Miss Portman, who had none of the princess' keenness for the undertaking. She was tired after the journey and for herself would rather have had a cup of tea than see fifty emperors unwell as many statues by celebrated sculptors.

"Oh, no!" cried Virginia. "We'll get to the front somehow sooner or later, even if we're taken off our feet. Look at that man just ahead of us. He doesn't mean to turn back. He's not a nice man, but he's terribly determined. Let's keep close to him and see what he means to do; then maybe we shall be able to do it as well."

Miss Portman glanced at the person indicated by a nod of the princess' head. Undismayed by the mass of human beings that blocked the Leopoldplatz a few yards ahead, he walked rapidly along without the least hesitation. He had the air of knowing exactly what he wanted to do and how to do it. Even Miss Portman, who had no imagination, saw this by his back. The set of the head on the shoulders was singularly determined, and the walk revealed a consciousness of importance accounted for perhaps by the gray and crimson uniform which might be that of some official order. On the sleek black head was a large cocked hat, adorned with an eagle's feather, fastened in place by a gaudy jewel, and this hat was pulled down very far over the face.

"Perhaps he knows that they'll let him through," said Miss Portman. "He seems to be a dignitary of some sort. We can't do better, if you're determined to go on, than keep near him."

"He has the air of being ready to die," whispered Virginia, for they were close to the man now.

"How can you tell? We haven't seen his face," replied the other in the same cautious tone.

"No. But look at the back of his neck and his ears."

Miss Portman looked and gave a little shiver. She would never have thought of observing it if her attention had not been called by the princess. But it was true. The back of the man's neck and his ears were of a ghastly yellow white.

"Horrid!" she ejaculated. "He's probably dying of some contagious disease. Do let's get away from him."

"No, no," said Virginia. "He's our only hope. They're going to let him pass through. Listen."

Miss Portman listened, but as she understood only such words of Rhaetian as she had picked up in the last few weeks she could merely surmise that he was ordering the crowd out of his way because he had a special message from the lord chancellor to the burgo-master.

The human wall opened. The man darted through, and Miss Portman was dragged after him by the princess. So close to him had they kept that they might easily be supposed to be under his escort, and, in any case, they passed before there was time to dispute their right of way.

"It must be the secretary of Herr Koffman, the new burgo-master," Virginia heard one man say to another, "and those ladies are with him."

On and on through the crowd passed the man in gray and crimson, oblivious to the two women who were using him. There was something about that disagreeable back of his which proclaimed him a man of but one idea at a time. Close to the front line of spectators, however, there came a check.



"We can't do better."

People were vexed at the audacity of the girl and the elderly woman and would have pushed them back, but at the critical second the blue and silver uniformed band of Rhaetia's crack regiment, the Imperial Life guards, struck up an air which told that the emperor was coming. Promptly the small group concerned forgot its grievance in excitement, crowding together so that Virginia was pressed to the front, and only Miss Portman was pushed ruthlessly into the background.

The poor lady raised a feeble protest in English which nobody heeded unless it were the man who had inadvertently acted as pioneer. At her shrill outcry he turned quickly, as if startled by the sudden cry, and Virginia was so close to him that her chin almost touched his shoulder. For the first time she had a glimpse of his face, which matched the yellow wax of his neck in pallor.

The girl shrank away from him involuntarily. "What a death's head," she thought—"a sly, wicked face and awful eyes! He looked frightened. I wonder why?"

Assured that the sharp cry did not concern him, the man turned to the front again, and, having obtained his object—a place in the foremost rank of the crowd, with one incidentally for the princess—he proceeded to take from his breast a roll of parchment tied with a large red seal. As he drew it out and rearranged his coat his hand trembled. It, too, was yellow white. The fellow seemed to have no blood in him.

Virginia, standing now shoulder to shoulder with the man in gray and crimson, had just time to feel a stirring of dislike and perhaps curiosity when a great cheer arose from thousands of throats. The square rang with a roar of loyal acclamation. Men waved tall hats, soft hats and green peasant hats with feathers. Beautifully dressed women grouped on the high decorated balconies waved handkerchiefs or scattered roses from gilded baskets. Women in gorgeous costumes from faroff provinces held up half frightened, half laughing children, and then a white figure on a white charger came riding into the square under the triumphal arch wreathed with flags and flowers.

Other figures followed—men in uniforms of green and gold and red on coal black horses—yet Virginia saw only the white figure, shining, wonderful.

Under the glittering helmet of steel, with its gold eagle, the dark face was clear cut as a cameo, and the eyes were bright with a proud light. To the crowd he was the emperor, a fine, popular, brilliant young man, who ruled his country better than it had been ruled yet by one of his house and, above all, provided many a pleasing spectacle for the people, but to Virginia he was far more—an ideal Sir Galahad or a St. George strong and brave to slay all dragon wrongs which might threaten his wide land.

"What if he should never love me?" was the one sharp thought which pierced her pride of him.

The people were proud, too, as he sat there controlling the white war horse, with its gold and silver trappings, the crusted jewels of many orders sparkling on his breast, while he saluted his subjects in his soldier's way.

For a moment there was a pause, save for a shouting, which rose and rose again. Then he alighted, whereupon important looking men with ribbons and decorations came forward, bowing, to receive the emperor. The ceremony of unveiling the statue of Rhaetia was about to begin.

To reach the great crimson draped platform on which he was to stand the emperor must pass within a few yards of Virginia. His gaze flashed over the gay crowd. What if it should rest upon her? The girl's heart was in her throat. She could feel it beating there, and for a moment the tall white figure was lost in a mist which dimmed her eyes.

She had forgotten how she came to this place of vantage, forgotten the pale man in gray and red to whom she owed her good fortune, but suddenly, while her heart was at its loudest and the mist before her eyes at its thickest, she grew conscious again of his existence, poignantly conscious of his close presence. So near her he stood that a quick start, a gathering of his muscles for a spring, shot like an electric message through her own body.

The mist was burnt up in the flame of a strange enlightenment, a clarity of vision which showed not only the hero of the day, the throng and the wax white man beside her, but something which was in the soul of that man as well.

"He is going to kill the emperor!" It was as if a voice spoke the words in her ear. She knew now why she had struggled to win this place, why she had succeeded, what she had to do or die in falling to do.

Leopold was not half a dozen yards away and was coming nearer. No one but Virginia suspected evil. She alone had felt the thrill of a murderer's nerves, the tense spring of his muscles. She alone guessed what the roll of parchment hid.

"Now—now!" the voice seemed to whisper again, and she had no fear.

While the crowd shouted wildly for "Unser Leo!" a man in gray and red leaped, catlike, at the white figure that advanced. Something sharp and bright flashed out from a roll of parchment, catching the sun in a streak of steely light.

Leopold saw, but not in time to swerve. The crowd shrieked, rushed forward too late, and the blade would have drunk his life had not the girl who had felt all, seen all, struck up the arm before it fell.

The rest was darkness for her. She knew only that she was sobbing and that the great square, with its crowded balconies, its ropes of green, its waving flags, seemed to collapse upon her and blot her out.

It was Leopold who caught her as she swayed, and while the people surged around the thwarted murderer the emperor sprang up the steps of the great crimson platform with the girl against his heart.

It was her blood that stained the pure white of his uniform, the blood from her arm, wounded in his defense. And, holding her up, he stood dominating the crowd.

Down there at the foot of the steps the man in gray and red was like a spent fox among the hounds, and Leopold's people in the fury of their rage would have torn him in pieces as the hounds tear the fox despite the cordon of police that gathered round him, but the voice of the emperor bade his subjects fall back.

"My people shall not be assassins!"

he cried to them. "Let the law deal with the madman. It is my will. Look at me alive and unharmed. Now give your cheers for the lady who has saved my life, and the ceremonies shall go on."

Three cheers had he said? They gave three—times three and bade fair to split the skies with shouts for the emperor. While women laughed and



"Let the law deal with the madman," wept and all eyes were upon that noble pair on the red platform something dim and gray was hurried out of sight and off to prison. On a signal the national anthem began. The voices of the people joined the brass instruments. All Kronburg was singing or asking "Who is she?" of the girl at the emperor's side.

CHAPTER SEVEN

IT is those in the thick of battle who can afterward tell least about it, and to the princess those five minutes—moments the most tremendous, the most vital of her life—were afterward in memory like a dream.

She had seen that a man was ghastly pale; she had caught a gleam of fear in his eye; she had felt a tigerish quiver run through his frame as the crowd pressed him against her. Instinct—and love—had told her the rest and taught her how to act.

Vaguely she recalled later that she had thrown herself forward and struck up the knife. An impression of that knife as the light gleamed on it alone was clear. Sickening, she had thought of the dull sound it would make in falling, of the blood that would spout from a rent in the white coat among the jeweled orders. She had thought, as one thinks in dying, of existence in a world empty of Leopold, and she had known that unless he could be saved her one wish was to go out of the world with him.

More than this she had not thought or known. What she did do was done scarcely by her own volition, and she seemed to wake with a start at last, to hear herself sobbing and to feel the throbbing, throbbing of a hot pain in her arm.

A hundred hands—not quick enough to save, yet quick enough to follow the lead given by her—had fought to seize the man in gray and stop a second blow. They had borne him away, while, as for Virginia, her work done, she forgot everything and every one but Leopold.

Revising, she had heard him speak to the crowd and told herself drearily that were she dying his voice could bring her back if he called. She even listened to each word that rang out like a cathedral bell above the babel. Still he held her, and when the cheers came she scarcely understood that they were for her as well as for Leopold, the emperor. Afterward, the necessity for public action over, he bent his head close enough to whisper, "Thank you," and then for Virginia every syllable was clear.

"You are the bravest woman alive," he said. "I had to keep them from killing the ruffian, but now I can speak to you alone. I thank you for what you did with my whole heart, and I pray heaven you're not seriously hurt."

"No, not hurt and very happy," the princess answered, hardly knowing what she said. She felt like a soul released from its body, floating in blue ether. What could it matter if that body ached or bled? Leopold was safe, and she had saved him.

He pointed to her sleeve. "The knife struck you. Your arm's bleeding, and the wound must be seen immediately by my own surgeon. Would that I could go with you myself, but duty keeps me here. You understand that. Baron von Lyndal and his wife will at once take you home, wherever you may be staying. They—"

"But I would rather stop and see the rest," said Virginia. "I'm quite well now, not even weak, and I can go down to my friend."

"If you're able to stop, it must be here with me," answered Leopold. "After the service you have done for me and for the country it is your place."

The ladies of the court, who, with their husbands, had been waiting to congratulate Leopold, crowded round the girl as the emperor turned to them, with a look and gesture of invitation. A seat was given her, and the arm in its blood stained sleeve was hastily bound up. She was the heroine of the day, dividing honors with its hero.

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