

Long Live The King

MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

He was a very young man, in a uniform. He was boyish, and smiling, and there was a dog beside him, and its head was on his knee. Wherever one looked in the room, the eyes of the photograph gazed at one. The king saw this, and because he was quite old, and because there were few people to whom a king dares to speak his most thoughts, he frequently spoke to the photograph. The older he grew, the more he felt, sometimes, as though it knew what he said. "If they've got him," he said now to the picture, "it is out of my hands, and into yours, my boy."

Much of his life had been spent in waiting in waiting for a son, in waiting for that son to grow to be a man, in waiting while that son in his turn wed and married and begot a man, in waiting, when that son had had a violent death, for the time when a king's hands could relinquish the center to his grandchild.

Quite suddenly the door opened, and the old man turned his head. Just beside stood a very dirty small boy.

The Crown Prince Ferdinand William Otto was most terribly frightened. Everything was at sixes and sevens. Miss Braithwaite had been giving her head off, and on seeing him had fallen in a faint. Not that she thought it was a real faint. He had unmistakably seen her eyelids quiver, and when she came to she had ordered him no supper, and four pages of German translation, and to go to bed at seven o'clock instead of seven-

enjoy the things I like. 'Nikky and I—'

"By 'Nikky' you mean Lieutenant Larisch?"

"Yes, sir."

"Go on."

"We like the same things, sir—the Duke's Peak-or-Bust, and all that."

The king raised himself on his elbow. "What was that?" he demanded.

Prince Ferdinand William Otto blushed, and explained. It was Bobby's name for the peak at the top of the scenic railway. He had been on the railway. He had been—his enthusiasm carried him away. His cheeks flushed. He sat forward on the edge of his chair, and gesticulated.

"I was awfully happy, sir," he ended. "It feels like flying, only safer. And the lights are pretty. It's like fairyland. There were two or three times when it seemed as if we'd turn over or leap the track. But we didn't."

The king lay back and thought. More than anything in the world he loved this boy. Put the occasion demanded a strong hand. "You were happy," he said. "You were disobedient. You were causing grave anxiety and distress—and you were happy! The first duty of a prince is to his country. His first lesson is to obey laws. He must always obey certain laws. A king is but the servant of his people. Some day you will be the king. You are being trained for that high office now. And yet you would set the example of insubordination, disobedience, and reckless disregard of the feelings of others."

"Yes, sir," said Prince Ferdinand William Otto, feeling very small and ashamed.

"Not only that. You slipped away. You did not go openly. You sneaked off, like a thief. Are you proud of it?"

"No, sir."

"I shall," said the king, "require no promise from you. Promises are poor things to hold to. I leave this matter in your own hands, Otto. You will be punished by Miss Braithwaite, and for the next ten days you will not visit me. You may go now."

Otto got off his chair. He was feeling exceedingly crushed. "Good night, sir," he said. And waited for his grandfather to extend his hand. But the old king lay looking straight ahead, with his mouth set in grim lines, and his hands folded over his breast.

At the door the crown prince turned and bowed. His grandfather's eyes were fixed on the two gold eagles over the door, but the photograph on the table appeared to be smiling at him.

Until late that night General Mettlich and the king talked together. The king had been lifted from his bed and sat propped in a great chair. Above his shabby dressing gown his face showed gaunt and old. In a straight chair facing him sat his old friend and chancellor.

"What it has shown is not entirely bad," said the king, after a pause. "The boy has initiative. And he made no attempt at evasion. He is essentially truthful."

"What it has also shown, sire, is that no protection is enough. When I, who love the lad, and would—when I could sleep, and let him get away, as I did—"

"The truth is," said the king, "we are both of us getting old." He tapped with his gnarled fingers on the blanket that lay over his knees. "The truth is also," he observed a moment later, "that the boy has very few pleasures. He is alone a great deal."

General Mettlich raised his shaggy head. Many years of wearing a soldier's cap had not injured his heavy gray hair. He had bristling eyebrows, white now, and a short, fighting mustache. When he was irritated, or disagreed with any one, his eyebrows came down and the mustache went up.

Many years of association with his king had given him the right to talk to him as man to man. They even quarreled now and then. It was a brave man who would quarrel with old Ferdinand H.

So now his eyebrows came down and his mustache went up. "How—alone, sire?"

"You do not regard that bigoted English woman as a companion, do you?"

"She is a thoughtful and conscientious woman, sire," he said stiffly. "It happened that he had selected her. She does her duty. And as to the boy being lonely, he has no time to be lonely. His tutors—"

"How old is he?"

"Ten next month."

The king said nothing for a time. Then—"It is hard," he said at last, "for seventy-four to see with the eyes of ten. As for this afternoon—why in the name of a thousand devils did they take him to see the 'Flying Dutchman'? I detest it."

"Her royal highness—"

"Annunciate is a fool," said his majesty. Then, dismissing his daughter with a gesture, "We don't know how

to raise our children here," he said impatiently. "The English do better. And even the Germans—"

It is not etiquette to lower one's eyebrows at a king and glare. But General Mettlich did it. He was rather a poor subject. "The Germans have not our problem, sire," he said, and stuck up his mustache.



"We Shall Do Well, Sire, to Raise the Boy at All."

"I'm not going to raise the boy a prisoner," insisted the king stubbornly.

General Mettlich bent forward and placed a hand on the old man's knee. "We shall do well, sire," he said gravely, "to raise the boy at all."

There was a short silence, which the king broke. "What is new?"

"We have broken up the university meetings, but I fancy they go on, in small groups. I was gratified, however, to observe that a group of students cheered his royal highness yesterday as he rode past the university buildings. The outlying districts are quiet. So, too, is the city. Too quiet, sire."

"They are waiting, of course, for my death," said the king quietly. "If only you were twenty years younger than I am, it would be better." He fixed the general with shrewd eyes. "What do those asses of doctors say about me?"

"Even at the best, sire—" He looked very ferocious, and cleared his throat. He was terribly ashamed that his voice was breaking. "Even at the best, but of course they can only give an opinion—"

"Six months?"

"A year, sire."

"And at the worst?" said the king, with a grim smile. Then, following his own line of thought: "But the people love the boy, I think."

"They do. It is for that reason, sire, that I advise particular caution." He hesitated. Then, "Sire," he said earnestly, "there is something of which I must speak. The Committee of Ten has organized again."

Involuntarily the king glanced at the photograph on the table.

"Forgive me, sire, if I waken bitter memories. But I fear—"

"You fear?" said the king. "Since when have you taken to fearing?"

"Nevertheless," maintained General Mettlich doggedly, "I fear. This quiet of the last few months alarms me. Dangerous dogs do not bark. I trust no one. The very air is full of agitation."

The king twisted his blue-veined old hands together, but his voice was quiet. "But why?" he demanded, almost fretfully. "If the people are fond of the boy, and I think they are, to carry him off, or injure him, would hurt the cause. Even the terrorists, in the name of a republic, can do nothing without the people."

"The mob is a curious thing, sire. You have ruled with a strong hand. Our people know nothing but to obey the dominant voice. The boy out of the way, the prospect of the Princess Hedwig on the throne, a few demagogues in the public squares—it would be the end."

The king leaned back and closed his eyes. His thin, arched nose looked pinched. His face was gray.

"All this," he said, "means what? To make the boy a prisoner, to cut off his few pleasures, and even then, at any time—"

"Yes, sire," said Mettlich doggedly. "At any time."

All through the palace people were sleeping. Prince Ferdinand William Otto was asleep, and riding again the little car in the land of delight. So that, turning a corner sharply, he almost fell out of bed.

On the other side of the city the little American boy was asleep also. At that exact time he was being tucked up by an entirely efficient and placid-eyed American mother, who felt under his head to see that his car was not turned forward. She liked close-fitting ears.

Nobody, naturally, was tucking up Prince Ferdinand William Otto. Or attending to his ears. But, of course, there were sentries outside his door, and a valet de chambre to be rung for, and a number of embroidered eagles scattered about on the curtains and things, and a country surrounding him which would one day be his, unless—

"At any time," said General Mettlich, and was grimly silent.

"Well?" inquired the king, after a time. "You have something to suggest, I take it."

The old soldier cleared his throat. "Sire," he began, "it is said that a chancellor should have but one position, his king. I have two, my king and my country."

The king nodded gravely. He knew both passions, relied on both. And found them both a bit troublesome at times!

"Once, some years ago, sire, I came to you with a plan. The Princess Hedwig was a child then, and his late royal highness was—still with us. For that, and for other reasons, your majesty refused to listen. But things have changed. Between us and revolution there stand only the frail life of a boy and an army none too large, and already, perhaps, affected. There is much discontent, and the offspring of discontent is anarchy."

The king smiled. But Mettlich had taken his courage in his hands, and went on. Their neighbor and hereditary foe was Karnia. Could they any longer afford the enmity of Karnia? One cause of discontent was the expense of the army, and of the fortifications along the Karnian border. If Karnia were allied with them, there would be no need of so great an army. They had the mineral wealth, and Karnia the seaports. The old dream of the empire, of a railway to the sea, would be realized.

He pleaded well. The idea was not new. To place the little King Otto IX on the throne and keep him there in the face of opposition would require support from outside. Karnia would furnish this support. For a price.

The price was the Princess Hedwig.

"That is my plea, sire," Mettlich finished. "Karl of Karnia is anxious to marry, and looks this way. To allow discontent and growing insurrection, to insure the boy's safety and his throne, to beat our swords into ploughshares—here he caught the king's scowl, and added—"to a certain extent, and to make us a commercial as well as a military nation, surely, sire, it gains much for us, and loses us nothing."

"But our independence!" said the king sourly.

However, he did not dismiss the idea. The fright of the afternoon had weakened him, and if Mettlich were right the royalist party would need outside help to maintain the throne.

"Karnia!" he said. "The lion and the lamb, with the lamb inside the lion! And in the meantime the boy—"

"He should be watched always."

"He has Lussin," Count Lussin was the crown prince's aide-de-camp.

"He needs a man, sire," observed the chancellor rather tartly.

The king cleared his throat. "This youngster he is so fond of, young Larisch, would he please you better?" he asked, with ironic deference.

"A good boy, sire. You may recall that his mother—" He stopped.

Perhaps the old king's memory was good. Perhaps there was a change in Mettlich's voice.

"A good boy?"

"None better, sire. He is devoted to his royal highness. He is outside now."

"Bring him in. I'll have a look at him."

Nikky, summoned by a chamberlain, stopped inside the doorway and bowed deeply.

"Come here," said the king.

He advanced.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-three, sire."

"In the grenadiers, I believe."

Nikky bowed.

"Like horses?" said the king suddenly.

"Very much, sire."

"And boys?"

"I—some boys, sire."

"Humph! Quite right, too. Little devils, most of them." He drew himself up in his chair. "Lieutenant Larisch," he said, "his royal highness the crown prince has taken a liking to you. I believe it is to you that our fright today is due."

Nikky's heart thumped. He went rather pale.

"It is my intention, Lieutenant Larisch, to place the crown prince in your personal charge. For reasons I need not go into, it is imperative that he take no more excursions alone. I want a real friend for the little crown prince. One who is both brave and loyal."

Afterward, in his small room, Nikky composed a neat, well-rounded speech, in which he expressed his loyalty, gratitude, and undying devotion to the crown prince. It was an elegant little speech. Unluckily, the occasion for it had gone by two hours.

"I—I am grateful, sire," was what he said. "I—" And there he stopped and choked up. It was rather dreadful.

"I depend on you, Captain Larisch," said the king gravely, and nodded his head in a gesture of dismissal. Nikky backed toward the door, struck a hassock, all but went down, bowed again at the door, and fled.

"A fine lad," said General Mettlich, "but no talker."

"All the better," replied his majesty. "I am tired of men who talk well. And"—he smiled faintly—"I am tired of you. You talk too well. You make me think. I don't want to think. I've been thinking all my life. It is time to rest, my friend."

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