

Long Live The King

BY MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

CHAPTER VII.

Nikky Does a Reckless Thing.

Nikky Larisch had been having an exciting time. First of all, he exchanged garments with the chauffeur, and cursed his own long legs, which proved difficult to cover adequately. But the chauffeur's long fur ulster helped considerably. The exchange was rather a ticklish matter, and would have been more so had he not found a revolver in the fur coat pocket.

Behold, then, Nikky of the brave heart standing over his prostrate prisoner, and rolling him, mummy fashion, in his own tunic and a rug from the machine.

"It is cold, my friend," he said briefly; "but I am a kindly soul, and if you have told me the truth, you will not have so much as a snuffle to remind you of this tomorrow."

"I have told the truth."

"As a soldier, of course," Nikky went on, "I think you have made a mistake. You should have chosen the precipice. But as a private gentleman, I thank you."

Having examined the knots in the rope, which were very well done, indeed, and having gagged the chauffeur securely, Nikky prepared to go. In his goggles, with the low-visor cap and fur coat, he looked not unlike his late companion. But he had a jaunty step as he walked toward the car, a bit of swagger that covered, perhaps, just a trifle of uneasiness.

For Nikky now knew his destination, knew that he was bound on perilous work, and that the chances of his returning were about fifty-fifty, or rather less.

He did not know his way. Over the mountains it was plain enough, for there was but one road. After he descended into the plain of Karnia, however, it became difficult. Sign posts were few and not explicit. But at last he found the railroad, which he knew well—that railroad without objective, save as it would serve to move troops toward the border. After that, Nikky found it easier.

But, with his course assured, other difficulties presented themselves. To take the letter to those who would receive it was one thing. But to deliver it, with all that it might contain, was another. He was not brilliant, was Nikky. Only brave and simple of heart, and unversed in the ways of darkness.

If, now, he could open the letter and remove it, substituting—well, what could he substitute? There were cigarette papers in his pocket. Trust Nikky for that. But how to make the exchange?

The engine was boiling hard, a dull roaring under the hood that threatened trouble. He drew up beside the road and took off the water cap. Then he whistled. Why, of course! Had it not been done from time immemorial, this steaming of letters? He examined it. It bore no incriminating seal.

He held the envelope over the water cap, and was loathly pleased to feel the flap loosen. After all, things were easy enough if one used one's brains. He rather regretted using almost all of his cigarette papers, of course. He had, perhaps, never heard of the drop of nicotine on the tongue of a dog.

As for the letter itself, he put it, without even glancing at it, into his cap, under the lining. Then he sealed the envelope again and dried it against one of the lamps. It looked, he reflected, as good as new.

He was extremely pleased with himself.

Before he returned to the machine he consulted his watch. It was three o'clock. True, the long early spring night gave him four more hours of darkness. But the messenger was due at three, at the hunting lodge in the mountains which was his destination. He would be, at the best, late by an hour.

On what the messenger had told him Nikky hung his hope of success. This was, briefly, that he should go to the royal shooting box at Wedeling, and should go, not to the house itself, but to the gate keeper's lodge. Here he was to leave his machine, and tap at the door. On its being opened, he was to say nothing, but to give the letter to him who opened the door. After that he was to take the machine away to the capital, some sixty miles farther on.

The message, then, was to the king himself. For Nikky, as all the world knew that Karl, with some kindred spirits, was at Wedeling, shooting. That is, if the messenger told the truth. Nikky intended to find out. He was nothing if not thorough.

When at last the lights of the lodge at the gate of Wedeling gleamed out through the trees, it was half-past three, and a wet spring snow was falling softly. In an open place Nikky looked up. The stars were gone.

The lodge now, and the gate keeper's house. Nikky's heart hammered as he left the car, hammering with

nervousness, not terror. But he went boldly to the door, and knocked.

So far all was well. There were footsteps within, and a man stepped out into the darkness, closing the door behind him.

"You have the letter?" he asked. "It is here."

"I will take it."

Nikky held it out. The man fumbled for it, took it.

"Orders have come," said the voice, "that you remain here for the night. In the morning you are to carry dispatches to the city."

Poor Nikky! With his car facing toward the lodge, and under necessity, in order to escape, to back it out into the highway! He thought quickly. There was no chance of overpowering his man quickly and silently. And the house was not empty. From beyond the door came the sounds of men's voices, and the thud of drinking mugs on a bare table.

"You will take me up to the house, and then put the car away until morning."

Nikky breathed again. It was going to be easy, after all. If only the road went straight to the shooting box itself, the rest was simple. But he prayed that he make no false turning, to betray his ignorance.

"Very well," he said.

His companion opened the door behind him. "Ready, now," he called. "The car is here."

Two men rose from a table where they had been sitting, and put on great coats of fur. The lamp light within quivered in the wind from the open door. Nikky was quite calm now. His heart beat its regular seventy-two, and he even reflected, with a sort of grim humor, that the chancellor would find the recital of this escapade much to his taste. In a modest way Nikky felt that he was making history.

The man who had received the letter got into the machine beside him. The other two climbed into the tonneau. And, as if to make the denouement doubly ridiculous, the road led straight, Nikky, growing extremely

cheerful behind his goggles, wondered how much petrol remained in the car. The men behind talked in low tones. "They are late tonight," grumbled one of them, as the house appeared full lighted. "A tardy start tomorrow again!"

"The king must have his sleep," commented the other, rather mockingly.

With a mastery sweep, Nikky drew up his machine before the entrance. Let them once alight, let him but start his car down the road again, and all the devils of the night might follow. He feared nothing.

But here again Nikky planned too fast. The servant who came out to open the doors of the motor had brought a message. "His majesty desires that the messenger come in," was the bomb-shell which exploded in Nikky's ears.

Nikky hesitated. And then some imp of recklessness in him prompted him not to run away, but to see the thing through. It was, after all, a chance either way. These men beside the car were doubtless armed—one at least, nearest him, was certainly one of Karl's own secret agents. And, as Nikky paused, he was not certain, but it seemed to him that the man took a step toward him.

"Very well," said Nikky, grumbling. "But I have had a long ride, and a cold one. I need sleep."

Even then he had a faint hope that the others would precede him, and that it would be possible to leap back to the car and escape. But, whether

by accident or design, the group closed about him. Flight was out of the question.

A little high was Nikky's head as he went in. He had done a stupid thing now, and he knew it. He should have taken his letter and gone back with it. But, fool or not, he was a soldier. Danger made him calm.

The lodge was noisy. Loud talking, the coming and going of servants with trays, the crackle of wood fires in which whole logs were burning, and, as Nikky and his escort entered, the roaring chorus of a hunting song filled the ears.

Two of the men flung off their heavy coats, and proceeded without ceremony into the room whence the sounds issued. The third, however, still holding the letter, ushered Nikky into a small side room, a sort of study, since it contained a desk. For kings must pursue their clerical occupations even on holidays.

Nikky had reluctantly removed his cap. His goggles, however, he ventured to retain. He was conscious that his guide was studying him intently. But not with suspicion, he thought. Rather as one who would gauge the caliber of the man before him. He seemed satisfied, too, for his voice, which had been curt, grew more friendly.

"You had no trouble?" he asked. "None, sir."

"Did Niburg say anything?"

Niburg, then, was the spy of the cathedral. Nikky reflected. Suddenly he saw a way out. It was, he afterward proclaimed, not his own thought. It came to him like a message. He burned a candle to his patron saint, some time later, for it.

"The man Niburg had had an unfortunate experience, sir. He reported that, during an evening stroll, before he met me, he was attacked by three men, with the evident intention of securing the letter. He was badly beaten up."

His companion started. "Niburg," he said. "Then—" He glanced at the letter he held. "We must find some one else," he muttered. "I never trusted the fellow. A clerk, nothing else. For this work it takes wit."

Nikky, sweating with strain, felt that it did, indeed. "He was badly used up, sir," he offered. "Could hardly walk, and was still trembling with excitement when I met him."

The man touched a bell. "Tell his majesty," he said to the servant who appeared, "that his messenger is here."

The servant bowed and withdrew.

Nikky found the wait that followed trying. He thought of Hedwig, and of the little crown prince. Suddenly he knew that he had no right to attempt this thing. He had given his word, almost his oath, to the king, to protect and watch over the boy. And here he was, knowing now that mischief was afoot, and powerless. He cursed himself for his folly.

Then Karl came in. He came alone, closing the door behind him. Nikky and his companion bowed, and Nikky surveyed him through his goggles. The same mocking face he remembered, from Karl's visit to the summer palace, the same easy, graceful carriage, the same small mustache. He was in uniform and apparently in a comparatively gracious mood. He had been drinking, but he was not intoxicated. He was slightly flushed, his eyes were abnormally bright. He looked, for the moment, rather amiable. Nikky was to learn, later on, how easily his smile hardened to a terrifying grin.

He ignored Nikky's companion. "You brought a letter?"

Nikky bowed, and the other man held it out. Karl took it.

"The trip was uneventful?"

"Yes, sire."

"A bad night for it," Karl observed, and glanced at the letter in his hand. "Was there any difficulty at the frontier?"

"None, sire."

Karl tore the end off the envelope. "You will remain here tonight," he said. "Tomorrow morning I shall send dispatches to the city. I hope you have petrol. These fellows here—" He did not complete the sentence. He inserted two royal fingers into the envelope and drew out—Nikky's cigarette papers!

For a moment there was complete silence in the room. Karl turned the papers over.

It was then that his face hardened into a horrible grin. He looked up, holding his head slowly.

"What is this?" he demanded, very quietly.

"The letter, sire," said Nikky. "I—"

"The letter! Do you call these it letter?"

Nikky drew himself up. "I have brought the envelope which was given me."

Without a word Karl held out papers and envelope to the other man, who took them. Then he turned to Nikky, and now he raised his voice. "Where did you get this—hoax?" he demanded.

"At the cathedral, from the man Niburg."

"You lie!" said Karl. Then, for a moment, he left Nikky and turned on his companion in a fury. He let his royal rage beat on that unlucky individual while the agent stood, white and still. Not until it was over, and Karl, spent with passion, was pacing the floor, did Nikky venture a word.

"If this is not what your majesty expected," he said, "there is perhaps an explanation."

Karl wheeled on him. "Explanation!"

"The man Niburg was attacked, early last evening, by three men. They beat him badly, and attempted to rob him. His story to me, sire. He believed that they were after the letter, but that he had discovered it. It is, of

course, a possibility that, while he lay stunned, they substituted another envelope for the one he carried."

Karl tore the envelope from the agent's hands and inspected it carefully. Evidently, as with the agent, the story started a new train of thought. Nikky drew a long breath. After all, there was still hope that the early morning shooting would have another target than himself.

Karl sat down, and his face relaxed. It was stern, but no longer horrible. "Tell me the Niburg's story," he commanded.

"He was walking through the old city," Nikky commenced, "when three men fell on him. One, a large one, knocked him insensible and then went through his pockets. The others—"

"Strange!" said Karl. "If he was insensible, how does he know all this?"

"It was his story, sire," Nikky explained. But he colored. "A companion, who was with him, ran away."

"This companion," Karl queried. "A dark, heavy fellow, was it?"

"No. Rather a pale man, blond, A—" Nikky checked himself.

But Karl was all suavity. "So," he said, "while Niburg was unconscious the large man took the letter, which was sealed, magically opened it, extracted its contents, replaced them with—this, and then sealed it again!"

The king turned without haste to a drawer in his desk, and opened it. He was smiling. When he faced about again, Nikky saw that he held a revolver in his hand. Save that the agent had taken a step forward, nothing in the room had changed. And yet, for Nikky everything had changed.

Nikky had been a reckless fool, but he was brave enough. He smiled, a better smile than Karl's twisted one. "I have a fancy," said King Karl, "to manage this matter for myself. Keep back, Kaiser. Now, my friend, you will give me the packet of cigarette papers you carry."

Resistance would do no good. Nikky brought them out, and Karl's twisted smile grew broader as he compared them with the ones the envelope had contained.

"You see," he said, "you show the hand of the novice. You should have

thrown these away. But, of course, all your methods are wrong. Why, for instance, have you come here at all? You have my man—but that I shall take up later. We will first have the letter."

But here Nikky stood firm. Let them find the letter. He would not help them. But again he cursed himself. There had been a thousand hiding places along the road—but he must bring the incriminating thing with him, and thus condemn himself!

Now commenced a curious scene, curious because one of the actors was Karl of Karnia himself. He seemed curiously loath to bring in assistance, did Karl. Or perhaps the novelty of the affair appealed to him. And Nikky's resistance to search, with that revolver so close, was short lived.

Even while he was struggling, Nikky was thinking. Let them get the letter if they must. Things would at least be no worse than before. But he resolved that no violence would tear from him the place where the messenger was hidden. Until they had got that, he had a chance for life.

They searched his cap last. Nikky, panting after that strange struggle, saw Kaiser take it from the lining of his cap, and pass it to the king.

Karl took it. The smile was gone now, and something ugly and terrible had taken its place. But that, too, faded as he looked at the letter.

It was a blank piece of note paper.

With the approach of the anniversary of his son's death, the king grew increasingly restless. Each year he determined to put away this old grief, and each year, as his bodily weakness increased, he found it harder to do so.

On other years he had had the crown prince with him as much as possible on this dreary day of days. But the crown prince was exiled, in disgrace. Not even for the comfort of his small presence could stern discipline be relaxed.

(To be continued)

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Uncle John D. Rockefeller has just finished paying his income tax, amounting to \$32,400,000. This leaves him only \$22,000,000 on which to support his family this year.

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