

Long Live The King

MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

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To this dreary refuge the countess had fled. She wanted the silence of its still rooms in which to think. Wretched herself, its wretchedness called her. As the carriage which had brought her from the railway turned into its woods, and she breathed the pungent odor of pine and balsam, she relaxed for the first time.

Why was she so hopeless? She could escape. She knew the woods well. None who followed her could know them so well. She would get away, and somewhere, in a new world, make a fresh start. Surely, after all, peace was the greatest thing in the world.

The carriage drove on; Minna, on the box, crossed herself at sight of the church, and chatted with the driver, a great figure who crowded her to the very edge of the seat.

"I am glad to be here," she said. "I am sick of grandeur. My home is in Etzel." She turned and inspected the man beside her. "You are a new-comer, I think?"

"I have but just come to Etzel."

"Then you cannot tell me about my people." She was disappointed.

"And you," inquired the driver, "you will stay for a visit?"

"A week only. But better than nothing."

"After that, you return to the city?"

"Yes, Madame the countess—you would know, if you were Etzel-born—madame the countess is a lady in waiting to her royal highness, the Arch-duchess Annunziata."

"So!" said the driver. But he was not curious, and the broken road demanded his attention. He was but newly come, so very newly that he did not know his way, and once made a wrong turning.

The countess relaxed. She slept that night.

When she had breakfasted and dressed, she went out on a balcony, and looked down at the valley. Her eyes dropped to the old wall below, where in the sunshine the caretaker was beating a rug. Close to him, in intimate and cautious conversation, was the driver of the night before. Glancing up, they saw her and at once separated.

Gone was peace, then. The countess knew—knew certainly. "Our eyes see everywhere." Eyes, indeed—eyes that even now the caretaker raised furtively from his rug.

Nevertheless, the countess was minded to experiment, to be certain. For none is so suspicious, she knew, as one who fears suspicion. None so guilty as the guilty. During the forenoon she walked through the woods, going briskly, with vigorous, mountain-bred feet. No crackle of underbrush disturbed her. Swift turnings revealed no lurking figures skulking behind the trunks of trees. But where an ancient stone bridge crossed a mountain stream, she came on the huge driver of the night before reflectively fishing.

He gazed at her gravely, and the countess paused and looked at him. "You have caught no fish, my friend?" she said.

"No, madame. But one plays about my hook."

She turned back. Eyes everywhere, and arms, great hairy arms. And feet that, for all their size, must step lightly!

On the second day she made a desperate resolve, and characteristically put it into execution at once. She sent for the caretaker. When he came, uneasy, for the Loscheks were justly feared in the countryside, and even the thing of which he knew gave him small courage, she lost no time in evasion.

"Go," she said, "and bring here your accomplice."

"My accomplice, madame! I do not—"

"You heard me," she said.

He turned, half sullen, half terrified, and paused. "Which do you refer to, madame?"

She had seen only the one. Then here were others. Who could tell how many others?

"The one who drove here."

So he went, leaving her to desperate reflection. When he returned, it was to usher in the heavy figure of the spy.

"Which of you is in authority?" she demanded.

"I, madame." It was the spy who spoke.

She dismissed the caretaker with a gesture.

"Have you any discretion over me? Must you refer matters to those who sent you?"

"I must refer to them."

"How long will it take to send a message and receive a reply?"

He considered. "Until tomorrow night, madame."

"Another day gone, then, and nothing terminated!"

"Now, listen," she said, "and listen carefully. I have come here to decide

a certain question. Whether you know what that question is or not, does not matter. But before I decide it I must take a certain journey. I wish to make that journey. It is into Karnta."

She watched him. "It is impossible. My husband—"



"Which of You is in Authority?" She Demanded.

"I am not asking your permission. I wish to send a letter to the committee. They, and they alone, will determine this thing. Will you send the letter?"

When he hesitated, perplexed, she got up and moved to her writing table. "I shall write the letter," she said laughingly. "See that it is sent. When I report at the end of the time that I have sent such a letter, you can judge better than I the result if it has not been received."

He was still dubious, but she wrote the letter and gave it to him, her face proud and scornful. But she was not easy, for all that, and she watched from her balcony to see if any messenger left the castle and descended the mountain road. She was rewarded, an hour later, by seeing a figure leave the old gateway and start about toward the village, a pale faced man with colorless hair. A part of the hidden guard that surrounded her, she knew, and somehow familiar. But, although she racked her brains, she could not remember where she had seen him.

That day, toward evening, the huge man presented himself. He brought no letter, but an oral message. "Permission is given, madame," he said. "I myself shall accompany you."

CHAPTER XII.

Nicky Makes a Promise.

The chancellor lived alone, in his little house near the palace, a house that looked strangely like him, overhanging eyebrows and all, with windows that were like his eyes, clear and concealing many secrets. A grim, gray little old house, which concealed behind it a walled garden full of unexpected charms. And that, too, was like the chancellor.

Mathilde kept his house for him, mended and pressed his uniforms, washed and starched his linen, quarreled with the orderly who attended him, and drove him to bed at night.

Mathilde was in touch with the people. It was Mathilde, and not one of his agents, who had brought word of the approaching revolt of the copper-smiths' guild, and enabled him to check it almost before it began. A stoic, this Mathilde, with her tall, spare figure and glowing eyes, stoic and patriot. Once every month she burned four candles before the shrine of Our Lady of Sorrows in the cathedral, because of four sons she had given to her country.

On the evening of the day Hedwig had made her futile appeal to the king, the chancellor sat alone. His dinner, almost untasted, lay at his elbow. It was nine o'clock. At something after seven he had paid his evening visit to the king, and had found him uneasy and restless.

"Sit down," the king had said. "I need steady, old friend."

"Steady, sire?"

"I have had a visit from Hedwig. Rather a stormy one, poor child. He turned and fixed on his chancellor his faded eyes. "You still think it is the best thing?"

"It is the only thing."

"But all this haste," put in the king questionably. "Is that so necessary? Hedwig boys for time. She hardly

knows the man."

"Time! But I thought—" He hesitated. How say to a dying man that time was the one thing he did not have?

"Another thing, sire," interposed, but I feel—"

It seems, however, that the young protégé of yours, Larisch, has been making love to her over Otto's head."

Mathilde's face hardened, a gradual process, as the news penetrated in all its significance.

"A boy and girl affair, sire. He is loyal. And in all of this, you and I are reckoning without Karl. The princess hardly knows him, and naturally she is terrified. But his approaching visit will make many changes. He is a fine figure of a man, and women—"

"Exactly," said the king dryly. What the chancellor meant was that women always had loved Karl, and the king understood.

"His wild days are over," bluntly observed the chancellor. "He is forty, sire."

"Aye," said the king. "And at forty a bad man changes his nature, and purifies himself in marriage! Nonsense, Karl will be as he has always been. But we have gone into this before. Only, I am sorry for Hedwig. Get rid of this young Larisch."

The chancellor sat reflecting, his chin dropped forward on his breast. "Otto will miss him."

"Well, out with it. I may not dismiss him. What, then?"

"It is always easy to send men away. But it is sometimes better to retain them, and force them to your will. We have here an arrangement that is satisfactory. Larisch is keen, young, and loyal. Hedwig has thrown herself at him. For that, sire, she is responsible, not he."

"Then get rid of her," growled the king.

The chancellor rose. "If the situation is left to me, sire," he said, "I will promise two things. That Otto will keep his friend, and that the Princess Hedwig will bow to your wishes without further argument."

"Do it, and God help you," said the king, again with the flicker of amusement.

The chancellor had gone home, walking heavily along the darkening streets. Once again he had conquered. The reins remained in his guarded old hands. And he was about to put the honor of the country into the keeping of the son of Maria Menrad, whom he had once loved.

So now he sat in his study, and waited. When he heard Nikky's quick step as he came along the tile passage, he picked up his pipe.

Nikky saluted, and made his way across the room in the twilight, with the ease of familiarity. "I am late, sir," he apologized. "We found our man, and he is safely jailed. He made no resistance."

"Sit down," said the chancellor. And, touching a bell, he asked Mathilde for coffee. "So we have him," he reflected. "The next thing is to discover if he knows who his assailants were. That, and the person for whom he acted—however, I sent for you for another reason. What is this about the Princess Hedwig?"

"The Princess Hedwig?"

"What folly, boy! A young girl who cannot know her own mind! And for such a bit of romantic tridling you would ruin yourself. It is ruin. You know that."

Nikky remained silent, a little sullen.

"The princess went to the king with her story this evening." The boy started. "A cruel proceeding, but the young are always cruel. The expected result has followed: The king wishes you sent away."

"I am at his command, sir."

The chancellor filled his pipe from a bowl near by, working deliberately. Nikky sat still, rather rigid.

"May I ask," he said at last, "that you say to the king that the responsibility is mine? No possible blame can attach to the Princess Hedwig. I love her, and—I am not clever. I show what I feel."

"The immediate result," said the chancellor cruelly, "will doubtless be a putting forward of the date of her marriage." Nikky's hands clenched. "A further result would be your dismissal from the army. One does not do such things as you have done, lightly."

"Lightly!" said Nikky Larisch. "Heaven!"

"But," continued the chancellor, "I have a better way. I have faith, for one thing, in your blood. The son of Maria Menrad must be—his mother's son. And the crown prince is attached to you. Not for your sake, but for his, I am inclined to be lenient. What I shall demand for that leniency is that no word of love again pass between you and the Princess Hedwig."

"It would be easier to go away."

Nikky closed his eyes. It was getting to be a habit, just as some people crack their knuckles.

"We need our friends about us," the chancellor continued. "The carnival is coming, always a dangerous time for us. The king grows weaker day by day. A crisis is impending for all of us, and we need you."

Nikky rose, steady enough now, but white to the lips.

"I give my word, sir," he said. "I shall say no word of—of how I feel to Hedwig. Not again. She knows—and I think," he added proudly, "that she knows I shall not change. That I shall always—"

"Exactly!" said the chancellor. It was the very pith of the king's dry old voice. "Of course she knows, before a woman. And now, good night."

The Crown Prince Ferdinand-William Otto of Livonia was having a birthday. Now, a birthday for a crown prince of Livonia is not a matter of a cake with candles on it, and having his ears pulled, once for each year and an extra one to grow on. Nor of a holiday from lessons, and a picnic in spring woods. Nor a party, with children frolicking and scratching the best furniture.

In the first place, he was awakened at dawn and taken to early service in the chapel, a solemn function, with the court assembled and slightly sleepy. The crown prince, who was trying to look his additional dignity of years, sat and stood as erect as possible, and yawned only once.

At eleven o'clock came word that the king was too ill to have him to luncheon, but that he would see him for a few moments that afternoon. Prince Ferdinand-William Otto, who was disgruntling the sentence, "Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves in America," and doing it wrong, looked up in dismay.

"I'd like to know what's the use of having a birthday," he declared rebelliously.

The king did not approve of birthday gifts. So there were no gifts. None, that is, until the riding hour came, and Nikky, subverter of all discipline. He had brought a big lady, wrapped in paper.

"It's quite fresh," he said, as they walked together across the place. "I'll give it to you when we get to the riding school. I saw the woman myself take it out of her basket. So it has no germs on it."

That afternoon, attired in his uniform of the guards, the crown prince



The Crown Prince Received the Delegation of Citizens.

received the delegation of citizens in the great audience chamber of the palace, a solitary little figure, standing on the red carpet before the dais at the end. The chancellor stood near the boy, resplendent in his dress uniform, a blue ribbon across his shirt front, over which Mathilde had taken hours. He was the Mettlich of the public eye now, hard of features, impassive, inflexible.

He had staged the affair well. The crown prince, standing alone, so small, so appealing, against his magnificent background, was a picture to touch the hardest. Not for nothing had Mettlich studied the people, read their essential simplicity, their answer to any appeal to the heart. These men were men of family. Surely no father of a son could see that lonely child and not offer him loyalty.

With the same wisdom, he had given the boy small instruction, and no speech of thanks. "Let him say what comes into his head," Mettlich had reasoned. "It will at least be spontaneous and boyish."

The first formalities over, and the crown prince having shaken hands nine times, the spokesman stepped forward. He had brought a long, written speech, which had already been given to the newspapers. But after a moment's hesitation he folded it up.

"Your royal highness," he said, looking down. "I have here a long speech, but all that it contains I can say briefly. It is your birthday, highness. We come, representing many others, to present to you our congratulations, and—the love of your people. It is our hope"—he paused. Emotion and excitement were getting the better of him—"our hope, highness, that you will have many happy years. To further that hope, we are here today to say that we, representing all classes, are your most loyal subjects. We have fought for his majesty the king, and if necessary we will fight for you."

He glanced beyond the child at the council, and his tone was strong and impassioned. "But today we are here, not to speak of war, but to present to you our congratulations, our devotion, and our loyalty."

Also a casket. He had forgotten that. He stepped back, was nudged, and recollected.

"Also a gift," he said, and ruined a fine speech among smiles. But the presentation took place in due order, and Otto cleared his throat.

(To be continued)

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