

Long Live The King

MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

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"Thank you all very much," he said. "It is a very beautiful gift. I admire it very much. I should like to keep it on my desk, but I suppose it is too valuable. Thank you very much."

The spokesman hoped that it might be arranged that he keep it on his desk, an ever-present reminder of the love of his city. To this the chancellor observed that it would be arranged, and the affair was over. To obviate the difficulty of having the delegation back down the long room, it was the crown prince who departed first, with the chancellor.

Late in the afternoon the king sent for Prince Ferdinand William Otto. He had not left his bed since the day he had placed the matter of Hedwig's marriage before the council, and now he knew he would never leave it. There were times between sleeping and waking when he fancied he had already gone, and that only his weary body on the bed remained. At such times he saw Hubert, only, strangely enough, not as a man grown, but as a small boy again; and his queen, but as she had looked many years before, when he married her, and when at last, after months of married woe, she had crept willing into his arms.

So, awakening from a doze, he saw the boy there, and called him Hubert. Prince Ferdinand William Otto, feeling rather worried, did the only thing he could think of. He thrust his warm hand into his grandfather's groping one, and the touch of his soft flesh roused the king.

The sister left them together, and in her small room dropped on her knees before the holy image.

In the king's bed chamber Prince Ferdinand William Otto sat on a high chair, and talked, but he viewed his grandfather with alarm. His aunt had certainly intimated that his running away had made the king worse. And he looked very ill.

"I'm awfully sorry, grandfather," he said.

"For what?"

"That I went away the other day, sir."

"It was, after all, a natural thing to do."

The crown prince could hardly believe his ears.

"If it could only be arranged safely—a little freedom—" The king lay still with closed eyes.

Prince Ferdinand William Otto felt uneasy. "But I am very comfortable, and—and happy," he hastened to say. "You are, please, not to worry about me, sir."

The king still held his hand, but he said nothing. There were many things he wanted to say. He had gone crooked where this boy must go straight. He had erred, and the boy must avoid his errors. He had cherished emitties, and in his age they cherished him. And now—

"May I ask you a question, sir?"

"What is it?"

"Will you tell me about Abraham Lincoln?"

"Why?" The king was awake enough now. He fixed the crown prince with keen eyes.

"Well, Miss Braithwaite does not care for him. She says he was not a great man, not as great as Mr. Gladstone, anyhow. But Bobby—that's the boy I met; I told you about him—he says he was the greatest man who ever lived."

"And who," asked the king, "do you regard as the greatest man?"

Prince Ferdinand William Otto fidgeted, but he answered bravely. "You, sir."

"Humph!" The king lay still, smiling slightly. "Well," he observed, "there are, of course, other opinions as to that. However—Abraham Lincoln was a very great man. A dreamer, a visionary, but a great man. You might ask Miss Braithwaite to teach you his 'Gettysburg address.' It is rather a model as to speech making, although it contains doctrines that—well, you'd better learn it."

"Yes, sir," said Prince Ferdinand William Otto. He hoped he was not very long.

"Otto," said the king suddenly, "do you ever look at your father's picture?"

"Not always."

"You might—look at it now and then. I'd like you to do it."

"Yes, sir."

CHAPTER XIII.

The Gate of the Moon.

A curious friendship had sprung up between old Adelbert and Bobby Thorpe. In off hours, after school, the boy hung about the ticket taker's booth, swept now to a wonderful cleanliness and adorned within with pictures cut from the illustrated papers.

Outwardly Adelbert was peaceful. The daughter now received his pension in full, and wrote comforting letters. But his resentment and bitterness at the loss of his position at the opera continued, even grew.

For while he had now even a regular wage, and could eat three meals, besides second breakfast and afternoon coffee, down deep in his heart old Adelbert felt that he had lost caste.

The opera—that was a setting! He had been, then, of the elect. And now, to what had he fallen! To selling tickets for an American catchpenny scheme, patronized by butchers, by housemaids, by the common people—a noisy, uproarious crowd, that nevertheless counted their change with suspicious eyes, and brought lunches in paper boxes, which they scattered about.

There was, however, a consolation. He had ordered a new uniform. Not for twenty years had he ventured the extravagance, and even now his cautious soul quailed at the price. For the last half dozen years he had stumped through the streets, painfully aware of shabbiness, of a shiny back, of patches, when, on the anniversary of the great battle to which he had sacrificed a leg, the veterans marched between lines of cheering people.

Now, on this approaching anniversary, he could go peacefully, nay, even proudly. The uniform was of the best cloth, and on its second fitting showed already its marvel of tailoring.

On an evening a week before the parade would occur, he got out his boots. He bought always large boots with straight soles, the right not much different from the left in shape. Thus he managed thriftily to wear, on his one leg, first one of the pair, then the other. But they were both worn now, and because of the cost of the new uniform, he could not buy others.

Armed with the better of the two he visited the cobbler's shop, and there met with bitter news.

"A patch here, and a new heel, comrade," he said. "With that and a polishing, it will do well enough for marching."

The usual group was in the shop, mostly young men, a scattering of gray heads. The advocates of strange doctrines, most of them. Old Adelbert disapproved of them, regarded them with a sort of contempt.

Now he felt that they smiled behind his back. It was his clothing, he felt. He shrugged his shoulders disdainfully. He no longer felt ashamed before them, any longer, although the tailor still pressed its seams and marked upon it with chalk, he was clad in the dignity of the new uniform.

He turned and nodded to them. "A fine evening," he said. "If this weather holds, we will have a good day for the marching." He squinted a faded eye at the sky outside.

"What marching?"

Old Adelbert turned on the speaker sharply. "Probably you have forgotten," he said scornfully, "but in a week comes an anniversary there are many who will remember. The day of a great battle. Perhaps," he added, "if you do not know of what I speak, there are some here who will tell you."

"It is the way of the old to live in the past," a student said. Then, imitating old Adelbert's majestic tone: "We, we live in the future. Eh, comrades?" He turned to the old soldier: "You have not seen the bulletins?"

"Bulletins?"

"There will be no marching, my friend. The uniform now—that is a pity. Perhaps the tailor—" His eyes mocked.

"No marching?"

"An order of the council. It seems that the city is bored by these ancient reminders. It is for peace, and would forget wars. And processions are costly. We grow thrifty. Bands and fireworks cost money, and money, my hero, is scarce—very scarce."

Again the group laughed.

After a time he grasped the truth. There was such an order. The cause was given as the king's illness.

"Since when," demanded old Adelbert angrily, "has the sound of his soldiers marching disturbed the king?"

"The sound of wooden legs annoys him," observed the mocking student, lighting a cigarette. "He would hear only pleasant sounds, such as the noise of tax money pouring into his vaults. Me—I can think of a pleasant; the tolling of the cathedral bell, at a certain time, will be music to my ears!"

Old Adelbert stood, staring ahead. At last he went out into the street, muttering. "They shame us before the people," he said quickly.

The order of the council had indeed been issued, a painful business over which Mettlich and the council had pondered long. For, in the state of things, it was deemed unwise to permit any gathering of the populace en masse. Mobs lead to riots, and riots again to mobs. Five thousand armed men, veterans, but many of them in their prime, were in themselves a danger. And on these days of anniversary it had been the custom of the university to march also, a guard of honor. Sedition was rife among the students.

The order was finally issued. Old Adelbert was ill that night. He tossed about in a fever. His body ached, even the leg which so long ago



"Since When Has the Sound of His Soldiers Marching Disturbed the King?"

had moldered in its shallow grave on a battlefield. For these things happen. By morning he was better, but he was a different man. His eyes glowed. His body twitched. He was stronger, too, for now he broke his sword across his knee, and flung the pieces out of the window. And with them went the last fragment of his old loyalty to his king.

Old Adelbert was now, potentially, a traitor.

On the morning after Adelbert had turned his back on his king, Bobby Thorpe rose early, so early, indeed, that even Peppy still slept in her narrow bed, and the milk sellers had not started on their rounds. The early rising was a mistake, owing to a watch which had strangely gained an hour.

Somewhat disconsolately, he wandered about. Heavy quiet reigned. From a window he watched the meat seller hang out a freshly killed deer, just brought from the mountains. He went downstairs and out on the street, past the piece of the concierge, who was scrubbing the stairs.

"I'm going for a walk," he told her. "If they send Peppy down you might tell her I'll be back for breakfast."

He stood for a time surveying the deer. Then he decided to go hunting himself. The meat seller obligingly gave him the handle of a floor brush, and with this improvised gun Bobby went deer stalking. His dog trotted at his heels.

Around the old city gate, still standing although the wall of which it had been a part was gone, there was excellent hunting. Here they killed and skinned a bear, took fine ivory tusks from a dead elephant, and searched for the trail of a tiger.

The gate was an excellent place for a tiger. Around it was planted an almost impenetrable screen of evergreens, so thick that the ground beneath was quite bare of grass. Here the two hunters crawled on stomachs that began to feel a trifle empty, and here they happened on the trail.

Tucker found it first. His stumpy tail grew rigid. Nose to the ground, he crawled and wriggled through the undergrowth, Bobby at his heels. And now Bobby saw the trail, footprints. It is true that they resembled those of heavy boots with nails. But on the other hand, no one could say surely that the nail marks were not those of claws.

Tucker circled about. The trail grew more exciting. Bobby had to crawl on hands and feet under and through thickets. Branches had been broken as by the passage of some large body. The sportsman clutched his weapon and went on.

An hour later the two hunters returned for breakfast. Washing did something to restore the leader to a normal appearance, but a wondering family discovered him covered with wounds and strangely silent.

"Why, Bob, where have you been?" his mother demanded. "Why, I never saw so many scratches!"

"I've been hunting," he replied briefly. "They don't hurt, anyhow."

Then he reapsed into absorbed silence. His mother, putting cream on his cereal, placed an experienced hand on his forehead. "Are you sure you feel well, dear?" she asked. "I think your head is a little hot."

"I'm all right, mother."

She was wisely silent, but she ran over in her mind the spring treatment for children at home. The blood, she felt, should be thinned after a winter of sausages and rich cocoa. She mentally searched her medicine case.

A strange thing happened that day. A broken plate disappeared from the upper shelf of a closet, where Peppy had hidden it; also a cup with a nick in it, similarly concealed; also the heel of a loaf of bread. Nor was that the end. For three days a sort of magic reigned in Peppy's kitchen. Ten potatoes, laid out to peel, became eight. Matches and two ends of candle walked out, as it were, on their own feet. A tin pan with a hole in it left the kitchen table and was discovered hiding in Bobby's bureau, when the Fraufru put away the washing.

The governess protested that she heard nothing she told him, and was

absent-minded at his lessons. But as she was always protesting about something, no one paid any attention. Bobby drew ahead on his pocket allowance without question, and as his birthday was not far off, asked for "the dollar to grow on" in advance. He always received a dollar for each year, which went into the bank, and a dollar to grow on, which was his own to spend.

With the dollar he made a number of purchases—candles and candlestick, a toy pistol and caps, one of the masks for the carnival, now displayed in all the windows, a kitchen knife, wooden plates, and a piece of bacon.

Now and then he appeared at the scenic railway, abstracted and viewing with a calculating eye the furnishings of the engine room and workshop. From there disappeared a broken chair, a piece of old carpet, discarded from a car, and a large padlock, but the latter he asked for and obtained.

His occasional visits to the railway, however, found him in old Adelbert's shack. He filled his pockets with charcoal from the pull beside the stove, and made cautious inquiries as to methods of cooking potatoes. But the pull of old Adelbert's gloom penetrated at last even through the boy's abstraction.

"I hope your daughter is not worse," he said politely, during one of his visits to the ticket booth.

"She is well. She recovers strength rapidly."

"And the new uniform—does it fit you?"

"I do not know," said old Adelbert grimly. "I have not seen it recently."

"On the day of the procession we are all going to watch for you. I'll tell you where we will be, so you can look for us."

"There will be no procession."

Then to the boy old Adelbert poured out the bitterness of his soul. He showed where he had torn down the king's picture, and replaced it with one of a dying stag. He reviewed his days in the hospital, and the hardships through which he had passed, to come to this. The king had forgotten his brave men.

During the rest of the day Bobby considered. No less a matter than the sharing of a certain secret occupied his mind. Now, half the pleasure of a secret is sharing it, naturally, but it should be with the right person. And his old playfellow was changed. Bobby, reflecting, wondered whether old Adelbert would really care to join his pirate crew, consisting of Tucker and himself. On the next day, however, he put the matter to the test, having resolved that old Adelbert needed distraction and cheering.

"You know," he said, talking through the window of the booth. "I think when I grow up I'll be a pirate."

"There be worse trades," said old Adelbert, whose hand was now against every man.

"And hide treasure," Bobby went on. "In a—in a cave, you know." Bobby edged closer to the window. "I've got the cave already."

"So?"

"Here, in the park. It is a great secret."

"A cave—here in the park?"

"I'll take you, if you'd like to see it." Old Adelbert was puzzled. The park offered, so far as he knew, no place for a cave. It was a plain, the site of the old wall, and now planted in grass and flowers. He himself had seen it graded and sown. A cave!

"Where?"

"That's a secret. But I'll show it to you, if you won't tell."

Old Adelbert agreed to silence.

Until midday, when the railway opened for business, the old soldier was free. So the next morning, due precautions having been taken, the two conspirators set off. Three, rather, for Tucker, too, was now of the band of the black flag.

Outside the thicket Bobby hesitated. "I ought to blindfold you," he said. "But I guess you'll need your eyes. It's a hard place to get to."

Perhaps, had he known the difficulties ahead, old Adelbert would not have gone on. And, had he turned back then, the history of a certain kingdom of Europe would have been changed. Maps, too, and school books and the life story of a small prince. But he went on. Stronger than his young guide, he did not crawl, but bent aside the stiff and ungainly branches of the firs. He battled with the thicket and came out victorious.

He was not so old, then, or so feeble. His arm would have been strong for the king, had not—

"There it is!" cried Bobby.

Not a cave, it appeared at first. A low doorway, barred with an iron grating, and padlocked. A doorway in the base of a side wall of the gate, and so hemped with leaves that its lower half was covered.

Bobby produced a key. "I broke the padlock that was on it," he explained. "I smashed it with a stone. But I got another. I always lock it."

Prolonged search produced the key. Old Adelbert's face was set hard. On what dungeon had this boy stumbled? It was strange.

Bobby was removing the leaf-mold with his hands. "It was almost all covered when I found it," he said, industriously scraping.

The door swung in, silently, as though the hinges had been recently oiled; as indeed they had, but not by the boy.

"It's rather dirty," he explained. "You go down steps first. Be very careful."

He extended an earthy hand and led the old man down. "It's dark here, but there's a room below; quite a good room. And I have candles."

(To be continued)

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