

# Long Live The King

MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

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But he comforted himself with the thought of Hedwig. He had taken her in his arms before he left, and she had made no resistance. She had even, in view of all that was at stake, made a desperate effort to return his kiss, and found herself trembling afterward.

In two weeks he was to return to her, and he whispered that to her.

On the day after the dinner party Otto went to a hospital with Miss Smithwaite. It was the custom of the palace to send the flowers from its peculiar functions to the hospitals, and the crown prince delighted in these errands.

So they went, escorted by the functionaries of the hospital, past the military wards, where soldiers in shabby uniforms sat on benches in the spring sunshine, to the general wards beyond. The crown prince was almost hidden behind the armful he carried. Miss Smithwaite had all she could hold. A convalescent patient, in slippers many sizes too large for him, wheeled the remainder in a barrow, and almost upset the barrow in his excitement.

Through long corridors into wards fresh scrubbed against his arrival, with white counterpanes exactly square, and patients forbidden to move and disturb the geometrical exactness of the beds, went Prince Ferdinand William Otto. At each bed he stopped, selected a flower, and held it out. Some there were who reached out, and took it with a smile. Others lay still, and saw neither boy nor blossom.

"They sleep, highness," the nurse would say.

"But their eyes are open." "They are very weary, and resting." In such cases he pinned the flower on the pillow, and went on.

One such, however, lying with vacant eyes fixed on the ceiling, turned and glanced at the boy, and into his empty gaze crept a faint intelligence. It was not much. He seemed to question with his eyes. That was all. As the little procession moved on, however, he raised himself on his elbow.

"Who was that?" The ward, which might have been interested, was busy keeping its covers straight and in following the progress of the party. For the man had not spoken before.

"The crown prince."

The sick man lay back and closed his eyes. Soon he slept. His comrade in the next bed beckoned to a sister. "He has spoken," he said. "Either he recovers, or—he dies."

But Haeckel did not die. He lived to do his part in the coming crisis, to prove that even the great hands of Black Humbert on his throat were not so strong as his own young spirit; lived, indeed, to confront the terrorist as one risen from the dead. But that day he lay and slept, by curious irony the flower from Karl's banquet in a cup of water beside him.

On the day before the carnival, Hedwig had a visitor, none other than the Countess Loschek. Hedwig, all her color gone now, her high spirit crushed, her heart torn into fragments and neatly distributed between Nikky, who had most of it, the crown prince, and the old king. Hedwig, having given her permission to come, greeted her politely but without enthusiasm.

"Highness!" said the countess surveying her, "may I speak to you frankly?"

"Please do," Hedwig replied. "Everybody does, anyhow. Especially when it is something disagreeable." Olga Loschek watched her warily. She knew the family as only the outsider could know it; knew that Hedwig, who would have disclaimed the fact, was like her mother in some things, notably in a disposition to be mild until a certain moment, submissive, even acquiescent, and then suddenly to become, as it were, a royalty and grow cold, haughty. But if Hedwig was driven in those days, so was the countess, desperate and driven to desperate methods.

"I am presuming, highness, on your mother's kindness to me, and your own."

"Well, go on," said Hedwig resignedly. But the next words brought her to her chair.

"Are you going to allow your life to be ruined?" was what the countess said.

Careful! Hedwig had thrown up her head and looked at her with hostile eyes. But the next moment she had forgotten she was a princess, and the granddaughter to the king, and remembered only that she was a woman, and error-stricken. She flung out her fists, and then buried her face in her hands.

"How can I help it?" she said. "How can you do it?" Olga Loschek countered. "After all, it is you who set do this thing. No one else. If you are offering on the altar of their ambition."

"Ambition?" "Ambition. What else is it? Surely you do not believe these tales they tell of old wives' tales of plot and murder."

"But the chancellor—" "Certainly the chancellor!" mocked Olga Loschek. "Highness, for years he has had a dream. A great dream. To fulfill his dream to bring prosperity and greatness to the country, and naturally, to him who plans it, there is a price to pay. He would have you pay it."

Hedwig raised her face and searched the other woman's eyes. "That is all, then?" she said. "All this other, this fright, this talk of treason and danger, that is not true?" "Not so true as he would have you believe," replied Olga Loschek steadily. "There are malcontents everywhere, in every land. It is all ambition, one dream or another."

"But my grandfather—" "An old man, in the hands of his ministers!"

Hedwig rose and paced the floor, her fingers twisting nervously. "But it is too late," she cried at last. "Everything is arranged. I cannot refuse now. They would—I don't know what they would do to me!"

"Do! To the granddaughter of the king. What can they do?" That aspect of things, to do her credit, had never occurred to Hedwig. She paused in front of the countess. "What can I do?" she asked pitifully. "That I dare not presume to say. I came because I felt—I can only say what, in your place, I should do."

"I am afraid. You would not be afraid," Hedwig shivered. "What would you do?" "If I knew, highness, that some one, for whom I cared, himself cared deeply enough to make any sacrifice, I should demand happiness. I rather think I should lose the world, and gain something like happiness."

"Demand!" Hedwig said hopelessly. "Yes, you would demand it. I cannot demand things. I am always too frightened."

The countess rose. "I am afraid I have done an unwise thing," she said. "If your mother knew—" She shrugged her shoulders. "You have only been kind. I have so few who really care."

The countess curtsied, and made for the door. "I must go," she said, "before I go further, highness. My apology is that I saw you unhappy, and that I resented it, because—" "Yes?" "Because I considered it unnecessary."

She was a very wise woman. She left then, and let the next step come from Hedwig. It followed, as a matter of record, within the hour, at least four hours sooner than she had anticipated. She was in her boudoir, not reading, not even thinking, but sitting staring ahead, as Minna had seen her do repeatedly in the past weeks. She dared not think for that matter.

Hedwig's notification that she would visit her, found the countess at leisure and alone. She followed the announcement almost immediately, and if she had shown cowardice before, she showed none now. She disregarded the chair Olga Loschek offered, and came to the point with a directness that was like the king's.

"I have come," she said simply, "to find out what to do."

The countess was as direct. "I cannot tell you what to do, highness. I can only tell you what I would do."

"Very well," Hedwig showed a touch of impatience. This was quibbling, and it annoyed her. "I should go away, now, with the person I cared about."

"Where would you go?" "The world is wide, highness." "Not wide enough to hide in, I am afraid."

"For myself," said the countess, "the problem would not be difficult. I should go to my place in the mountains. An old priest, who knows me well, would perform the marriage. After that they might find me if they liked. It would be too late."

"This priest—he might be difficult." "Not to a young couple, come to him, perhaps, in peasant costume. They are glad to marry, these fathers. There is much irregularity, I fancy," she added, still with her carefully detached manner, "that a marriage could be easily arranged."

But, before long, she had dropped her pretense of aloofness, and was taking the lead. Hedwig, weary with the struggle, and now trembling with nervousness, put herself in her hands, listening while she planned, agreed eagerly to everything. Something of grim amusement came into Olga Loschek's face after a time. By doing this thing she would lose everything. It would be impossible to conceal her complicity. No one, knowing Hedwig, would for a moment imagine the plan hers. Or Nikky's, either, for that matter.

She, then, would lose everything, even Karl, who was already lost to her. But—and her face grew set and her eyes hard—she would let those plotters in their grisly catcombs do their own filthy work. Her hands would be clean of that. Hence her amusement at this late day she, Olga Loschek, should be saving her own soul.

So it was arranged, to the last detail. For it must be done at once. Hedwig, a trifle terrified, would have postponed it a day or so, but the countess was insistent. Only she knew how the very hours counted, had them numbered, indeed, and watched them flying by with a sinking heart.

If she gave a fleeting thought to the palace, to the crown prince and his impending fate, she dismissed it quickly. She had no affection for Anunciata, and as to the boy, let them look out for him. Let Mettlich guard his treasure, or lose it to his peril. The passage under the gate was not of her discovery or informing.

### CHAPTER XVI. Nikky and Hedwig.

Nikky had gone back to his lodging, where his servant was packing his things. For Nikky was now of his majesty's household, and must exchange his shabby old rooms for the cold magnificence of the palace.

He was very downhearted. To the crown prince, each day, he gave the best that was in him, played and rode, invented delightful nonsense to bring the boy's quick laughter, carried pocketfuls of bones, to the secret revolt of his soldierly soul, was boyish and tender, frivolous or thoughtful, as the occasion seemed to warrant.

And always he was watchful, his revolver always ready and in touch, his eyes keen, his body, even when it seemed most relaxed, always tense to spring. For Nikky knew the temper of the people, knew it as did Mathilde gossiping in the market, and even better; knew that a crisis was approaching, and that on this small boy in his charge hung that crisis.

So Nikky trusted in his own right arm and in nothing else. The very size of the palace, its unused rooms, its long and rambling corridors, its rambling wings and ancient turrets, was against its safety.

Since the demonstration against Karl, the riding school hour had been given up. There were no drives in the park. The illness of the king furnished sufficient excuse, but the truth was that the royal family was practically besieged, by it knew not what.

Nikky, summoned to the chancellor's house that morning, had been told the facts, and had stood, rather still and tense, while Mettlich recounted them.

"Our very precautions are our danger," said the chancellor. "And the king—" He stopped and sat, tapping his fingers on the arm of his chair.

"Almost at the end. A day or two," Karl, with Hedwig in his thoughts, had returned to mobilize his army not far from the border for the spring maneuvers, and at a meeting of the king's council the matter of a mobilization in Livonia was seriously considered.

Fat Friese favored it, and made an impassioned speech, with sweat thick on his heavy face. "I am not cowardly," he finished. "I fear nothing for myself or for those belonging to me. But the duty of this council is to preserve the throne for the crown prince, at any cost. And, if we cannot trust the army, in what can we trust?"

"In God," said the chancellor grimly.

In the end nothing was done. Mobilization might precipitate the crisis and there was always the fear that the army, in parts, was itself disloyal.

The king, meanwhile, lay dying. Doctor Weidemann in constant attendance, other physicians coming and going. His apartments were silent. Rugs covered the corridors, that no footfall disturb his quiet hours. The nursing sisters attended him, one by his bedside, one always on her knees at the bedside in the small room beyond. He wanted little—now and then a sip of water, the cooled juice of fruit. Injections of stimulants, given by Doctor Weidemann himself, had scarred his old arms with purplish marks, and were absorbed more and more slowly as the hours went on.

He rarely slept, but lay inert and not unhappy. Anunciata came, and was



"In What Can We Trust?"

at last stricken by conscience to a prayer at his bedside. On one of her last visits that was. She got up to find his eyes fixed on her.

"Father, can you hear me?" "Yes."

"I—I have been a bad daughter to you. I am sorry. It is late now to tell you, but I am sorry. Can I do anything?" "Otto," he said, with difficulty. "You want to see him?"

"No." "She knew what he meant by that. He would have the boy remember him as he had seen him last.

"You are anxious about him?" "Very—anxious."

"Listen, father," she said, stooping over him. "I have been hard and cold. Perhaps you will grant that I have had two reasons for it. But I am going to do better. I will take care of him and I will do all I can to make him happy. I promise."

Perhaps it was relief. Perhaps even then the thought of Anunciata's tardy and certain-to-be bungling efforts to make Ferdinand William Otto happy amused him. He smiled faintly.

Nikky received a note from Hedwig late that afternoon. It was very brief: "Tonight at nine o'clock I shall go to the roof beyond Hubert's old rooms, for air. HEDWIG."

Nikky, who in all his incurious young life had never thought of the roof of the palace, save as a necessary shelter from the weather, a thing of tiles and gutters, vastly large, looked rather astounded.

"The roof!" he said, surveying the note. And fell to thinking, such a mixture of rapture and despair as only twenty-three, and hopeless, can know. Somehow or other he got through the intervening hours, and before nine he was on his way. He had the run of the palace, of course. No one noticed him as he made his way toward the empty suite which so recently had housed its royal visitor.

Hedwig, in a soft white wrap over her dinner dress, was at the balustrade. A very dignified fairy, although her heart thumped disgracefully.

Whatever Nikky had intended—of obeying his promise to the letter, of putting his country before love, and love out of his life—faded him instantly. The Nikky, ardent-eyed and tender-armed, who crossed the roof and took her almost fiercely in his arms, was all lover—and twenty-three.

"Sweetheart!" he said. "Sweetest heart!"

When, having kissed her, he drew back a trifle for the sheer joy of again catching her to him, it was Hedwig who held out her arms to him.

"I couldn't bear it," she said simply. "I love you. I had to see you again. Just once."

If he had not entirely lost his head before, he lost it then. He stopped thinking, was content for a time that her arms were about his neck, and his arms about her, holding her close. "Never let me go, Nikky," she whispered. "Hold me, always."

"Always!" said Nikky, valiantly and absurdly. "Like this?"

"Like this," said Nikky, who was, like most lovers, not particularly original. He tightened his strong arms about her.

Then, because she dared not give him time to think, she made her plea—rapid, girlish, rather incoherent, but understandable enough. They would go away together and be married. She had it all planned and some of it arranged. And then they would hide somewhere, and—and always be together, she finished, tremulous with anxiety.

And Nikky? His pulses still beating at her nearness, his eyes on her upturned, despairing young face, turned to him for hope and comfort, what could he do? He took her in his arms again and soothed her, while she cried her heart out against his tunic. He said he would do anything to keep her from unhappiness, and that he would die before he let her go to Karl's arms. But if he had stopped thinking before, he was thinking hard enough then.

(To be continued)

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