

Long Live The King

MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

"You are a very foolish boy," said the countess, watching him. "And since you are so fearful, I myself will remain here. There are sentries at the doors, and a double guard everywhere. What, in the name of all that is absurd, can possibly happen?"

That was when she won. For Nikky who has never been, in all his history, anything of a hero, and all of the romantic and loving boy—Nikky wavered and fell.

When Prince Ferdinand William Otto returned, it was with the word that Miss Braithwaite still slept, and that she looked very comfortable. Nikky was gone, and the countess stood by a window, holding to the sill to support her shaking body.

It was done. The boy was in her hands. There was left only to deliver him to those who, even now, were on the way. Nikky was safe. He would wait in her boudoir, and Hedwig would not come. She had sent no message. She was, indeed, at that moment a part of one of those melancholy family groups which, the world over, in palace or peasant's hut, await the coming of death.

Prince Ferdinand William Otto chatted. He got out the picture frame for Hedwig, which was finished now, with the exception of burning his initials in the lower left hand corner. After inquiring politely if the smell of burning would annoy her, the crown prince drew a rather broken backed "F," a weak-kneed "W," and an irregular "O" in the corner and proceeded to burn them in. He sat bent over the desk, the very tip of his tongue protruding, and worked conscientiously and carefully. Between each letter he burned a dot.

Suddenly, Olga Loschek became panic-stricken. She could not stay, and she saw this through. Let them follow her and punish her. She could not! She had done her part. The governess lay in a drugged sleep. A turn of the key, and the door to the passage beyond which Oskar waited would be closed off. Let follow what must, she would not see it.

"Highness," she said, "Lientenant Larisch will be here in a moment. Will you permit me to go?"

Otto was off his chair in an instant. "Certainly," he said, his mind still on the "O" which he was shading.

Old habit was strong in the countess. Although the boy's rank was numbered by moments, although his life was possibly to be counted by hours, she turned at the doorway and swept him a curtsy. Then she went out, and closed the door behind her.

The two sentries stood outside. They were of the terrorists. She knew, and they knew she knew. But neither one made a sign. They stared ahead, and Olga Loschek went out between them.

The Crown Prince Ferdinand William Otto was only a small boy, for all his title and dignity. And suddenly he felt lonely. Left alone, he returned to his expectations for the day, and compared them with the facts. He remembered other carnivals, with his carriage moving through the streets, and people showering him with fresh flowers. He rather glowed at the memory. Then he recalled that the chancelor had said he needed fresh air.

Something occurred to him, something which combined fresh air with action, yet kept to the letter of his promise—or was there a promise?—not to leave the palace.

The idea pleased him. It set him to smiling, and his bright hair to quivering with excitement. It was nothing less than to go on the roof and fud the ball. And he would have to hurry. Nikky would be sure to return soon.

He opened the door on to the great corridor, and stepped out, saluting the sentries, as he always did.

"I'll be back in a moment," he informed them. He was always on terms of great friendliness with the guard, and he knew these men by sight. "Are you going to be stationed here now?" he inquired pleasantly.

The two guards were at a loss. But one of them, who had a son of his own, and hated the whole business, saluted and replied that he knew not.

"I hope you are," said Ferdinand William Otto, and went on.

The sentries regarded one another. "Let him go," said the one who was a father.

The other one moved uneasily. "Our orders cover no such contingency," he muttered. "And, besides, he will come back. I hope to God he does not come back," he added stonily.

Five minutes to four.

The crown prince hurried. The corridors were almost empty. Here and there he met servants, who stood stiff against the wall until he had passed. On the marble staircase, leading up, he met no one, nor on the upper floor. He was quite warm with running and he paused in his father's suite to mop his face. Then he opened a window and went out on the roof. From the

balustrade, it looked extremely far to the ground.

Nevertheless, although his heart beat a trifle fast, he was still determined. A climb which Nikky with his long legs had achieved in a leap, took him up to a chimney. Below—it seemed a long way below—was the gutter. There was a very considerable slant. If one sat down, like Nikky, and slid, and did not slide over the edge, one should fetch up in the gutter.

He felt a trifle dizzy. But Nikky's theory was, that if one is afraid to do a thing, better to do it and get over being afraid.

So the crown prince sat down on the sloping roof behind the chimney and gathered his legs under him for a slide. Well for him that the ancient builders of the palace had been reckless with lead, that the gutter was both wide and deep. Well for Nikky, too, waiting in the boudoir below and hard driven between love and anxiety.

The crown prince, unaccustomed to tiles, turned over half-way down, and rolled. He brought up with a jerk in the gutter, quite safe, but extremely frightened. He sat there for quite a few minutes. There was no ball in sight, and the roof looked even steeper from this point.

Being completely self-engrossed, therefore, he did not see that the roof had another visitor. Had two visitors, as a matter of fact. One of them wore a blanket with a white "O" over a white "X" on it, and the other wore a mask, and considerable kitchen cutlery fastened to his belt. They had come out of a small door in the turret and were very much at ease. They leaned over the parapet and admired the view. They climbed on one of the garden chairs and looked over the expanse of the roof, which was when they saw Prince Ferdinand William Otto, and gazed at him.

"Gee whizz!" said the larger pirate, through his mask. "What are you doing there?"

The crown prince started, and stared. "I am sitting here," explained the crown prince, trying to look as though he usually sat in lead gutters. "I am looking for a ball."

"You're looking for a fall, I guess," observed the pirate. "You don't remember me, kid, do you?"

"I can't see your face, but I know your voice." His voice trembled with excitement.

"Lemme give you a hand," said the pirate, whipping off his mask. "You make me nervous, sitting there. You've got a nerve, you have."

The crown prince looked gratified. "I don't need any assistance, thank you," he said. "Perhaps, now I'm here, I'd better look for the ball."

"I wouldn't bother about the old ball," said the pirate, rather nervously for an old sea-dog. "You better get back to a safe place. Say, what made you pretend that our railway made you nervous?"

Prince Ferdinand William Otto climbed up the tiles, trying to look as though tiles were his native habitat. The pirates both regarded him with admiration, as he dropped beside them.

"How did you happen to come here?" asked the crown prince. "Did you lose your aeroplane up here?"

"We came on business," said the pirate importantly. "Two of the enemy entered our cave. We were guarding it from the underbrush, and saw them go in. We trailed them. They must die!"

"Really—die?"

"Of course. Death to those who defy us."

"Death to those who defy us!" repeated the crown prince, enjoying himself hugely, and quite ready for bloodshed.

"Look here, Dick Deadeye," said the larger pirate to the smaller, who stood gravely at attention. "I think he belongs to our crew. What say, old pal?"

Dick Deadeye wagged his tail.

Some two minutes later, the crown prince of Fivonia, having sworn the pirate oath of no quarter, except to women and children, was on his way to the pirate cave.

He was not running away. He was not disobedient. He was breaking no promises. Because, from the moment he saw the two confederates, and particularly from the moment he swore the delightful oath, his past was wiped away. There was, in his consciousness, no palace, no grandfather, no Miss Braithwaite, even no Nikky. There was only a boy and a dog, and a pirate den awaiting him.

"How'd you happen to be in that gutter?" Bobby demanded, as they started down the staircase in the wall. "Watch out, son, it's pretty steep."

"I was getting a ball."

"Is this your house?"

"Well, I live here," temporized Prince Ferdinand William Otto. A terrible thought came to him. Suppose this American boy, who detested kings and princes, should learn who he was!



Dick Deadeye Wagged His Tail.

"It looks like a big place. Is it a barracks?"

"No." He hesitated. "But there are a good many soldiers here. I—I never saw these steps before."

"I should think not," boasted Bobby. "I discovered them. I guess nobody else in the world knows about them. I put up a flag at the bottom and took possession. They're mine."

"Really!" said Prince Ferdinand William Otto, quite delighted. "He would never have thought of such a thing."

A door of iron bars at the foot of the long flight of steps—there were four of them—stood open. Here daylight, which had been growing fainter, entirely ceased. And here Bobby, having replaced his mask, placed an air rifle over his shoulder, and lighted a candle and held it out to the crown prince.

"You can carry it," he said. "Only don't let it drip on you. You'll spoil your clothes." There was a faintly scornful note in his voice, and Ferdinand William Otto was quick to hear it.

"I don't care at all about my clothes," he protested. And to prove it he deliberately tilted the candle and let a thin stream of paraffin run down his short jacket.

"You're a pretty good sport," Bobby observed. And from that time on he addressed his royal highness as "old sport."

When they reached the old dungeon the candle was about done. There was only time to fashion another black mask out of a piece of cloth that bore a strange resemblance to a black waistcoat. The crown prince donned this with a wildly beating heart. Never in all his life had he been so excited.

"We can get another candle, and come back and cook something," said the senior pirate, tying the mask on with pieces of brown string. "It gets pretty smoky, but I can cook, you'd better believe."

So this wonderful boy could cook, also! The crown prince had never met any one with so many varied attainments. He gazed through the eyeholes, which were rather too far apart, in rapt admiration.

"As you haven't got a belt," Bobby said generously, "I'll give you the rifle. Ever hold a gun?"

"Oh, yes," said the crown prince. He did not explain that he had been taught to shoot on the rifle range of his own regiment, and had won quite a number of medals. He possessed, indeed, quite a number of small but very perfect guns.

With the last gasp of the candle, the children prepared to depart. The senior pirate had already forgotten the



"No Quarter, Except to Women and Children."

two men he had trailed through the passage, and was eager to get out doors.

"Ready!" he said. "Now, remember, he was!

except to women and children. Shoot every man.

"Even if he is unarmed?" inquired the crown prince, who had also studied strategy and tactics, and felt that an unarmed man should be taken prisoner.

"Sure. We don't really shoot them, silly. Now. Get in step."

Then began, for the crown prince, such a day of joy as he had never known before. Even the Land of Delight faded before this new bliss of stalking from tree to tree, of killing unsuspecting citizens who sat on rugs on the ground and ate sausages and little cakes. Here and there, where a party had moved on, they salvaged a bit of food—the heel of a loaf, one of the small country apples. Shades of the court physicians, under whose direction the crown prince was daily fed a carefully balanced ration!

When they were weary, they stretched out on the ground, and the crown prince, whose bed was nightly dried with a warming pan for fear of dampness, yawned blissfully on earth still soft with the melting frosts of the winter. He grew muddier and dirtier. He had had no hat, of course, and his bright hair hung over his forehead in moist strands. Now and then he drew a long breath of sheer happiness.

As dusk descended, the crowd gradually dispersed, some to supper, but some to gather in the place and in the streets around the palace. For the rumor that the king was dying would not down.

At last the senior pirate consulted a large nickel watch.

"Gee! It's almost supper time," he said.

Prince Ferdinand William Otto consulted his own watch, the one with the inscription: "To Ferdinand William Otto, from his grandfather, on the occasion of his taking his first communion."

"Why can't you come home to supper with me?" asked the senior pirate. "Would your folks kick up a row?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Would your family object?"

"There is only one person who would mind," reflected the crown prince, aloud, "and she will be angry, anyhow. I—do you think your mother will be willing?"

"Willing? Sure she will! My governess—but I'll fix her. She's a German, and they're always cranky. Anyhow, it's my birthday. I'm always allowed a guest on birthdays."

So home together, gaily chatting, went the two children, along the cobble-paved streets of the ancient town, past old churches that had been sacked and pillaged by the very ancestors of one of them, taking short cuts through narrow passages that twisted and wormed their way between; and so, finally, to the door of a tall building where, from the concierge's room beside the entrance, came a reek of stewing garlic.

Neither of the children had noticed the unwonted silence of the streets, which had, almost suddenly, succeeded the noise of the carnival. What few passers-by they had seen had been hurrying in the direction of the palace. Twice they had passed soldiers, with lanterns, and once one had stopped and flashed a light on them.

"Well, old sport!" said Bobby in English, "anything you can do for me?"

The soldier had passed on, muttering at the insolence of American children. The two youngsters laughed consumedly at the witticism.

The concierge was out. His niece admitted them, and went back to her interrupted cooking. The children hurried up the winding stone staircase, with its iron rail and its gas lantern, to the second floor.

In the sitting room, the sour-faced governess was darning a hole in a small stocking. She looked at the clock.

"You are fifteen minutes late," she snapped, and bit the darning thread—not with rage, but because she had forgotten her scissors.

"I'm sorry, but you see—"

"Whom have you there?"

"A friend of mine," said Bobby, not a whit daunted.

The governess put down the stocking and rose. In so doing, she caught her first real glimpse of Ferdinand William Otto, and she staggered back.

"Holy Saints!" she said, and went white. Then she stared at the boy, and her color came back. "For a moment," she muttered—"but no. He is not so tall, nor has he the manner. Yes, he is much smaller!"

Which proves that, whether it wears it or not, royalty is always measured to the top of a crown.

In the next room Bobby's mother was arranging candles on a birthday cake in the center of the table. Pepy had iced the cake herself, and had forgotten one of the "b's" in "Bobby" so that the cake really read: "Boby—XII."

However, it looked delicious, and inside had been baked a tiny black china doll and a new American penny, with Abraham Lincoln's head on it. The penny was for good fortune, but the doll was a joke of Pepy's, Bobby being aggressively masculine.

Bobby, having passed the outpost, carried the rest of the situation by assault. Mrs. Thorpe saw Ferdinand William Otto, and went over, somewhat puzzled, with her hand out. "I am very glad Bobby brought you," she said. "He has so few little friends—"

(To be continued)

Was it not wasted effort for American to spend time inventing the submarine and then to spend more time inventing the submarine destroyer?

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