

Long Live the King

By MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

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COUNTESS LOSCHEK PLOTS TO FRUSTRATE THE MARRIAGE OF KARL AND HEDWIG

Synopsis.—The crown prince of Livonia, Ferdinand William Otto, ten years old, taken to the opera by his aunt, tires of the singing and slips away to the park, where he makes the acquaintance of Bobby Thorpe, a little American boy. Returning to the palace at night, he finds everything in an uproar as a result of the search which has been made for him. The same night the chancellor calls to consult the boy's grandfather, the old king, who is very ill. The chancellor suggests that to preserve the kingdom, which is threatened by plots of the terrorists to form a republic, the friendship of the neighboring kingdom of Karnia be secured by giving the Princess Hedwig in marriage to King Karl of that country.

CHAPTER III.—Continued.

The chancellor strode around the screen, scratching two tables with his sword as he advanced, and kissed the hand of the Princess Annunziata. They were old enemies and therefore always very polite to each other. The archduchess offered him a cup of tea, which he took, although she always made very bad tea. And for a few moments they discussed things. Thus: the king's condition; the replanting of the place with trees; and the date of



They Were Old Enemies.

bringing out the Princess Hilda, who was still in the school room.

But the archduchess suddenly came to business. She was an abrupt person. "And now, general," she said, "what is it?"

"I am in trouble, highness," replied the chancellor simply.

"We are most of us in that condition at all times. I suppose you mean this absurd affair of yesterday. Why such a turmoil about it? The boy ran away. When he was ready he returned. He is here now, and safe."

"I am afraid he is not as safe as you think, madame."

"Why?"

He sat forward on the edge of his chair, and told her of the students at the university, who were being fired by some powerful voice; of the disappearance of the two spies; of the evidence that the Committee of Ten was meeting again, and the failure to discover their meeting place; of disaffection among the people, according to the reports of his agents. And then to the real purpose of his visit. Karl of Karnia had, unofficially, proposed for the Princess Hedwig. He had himself broached the matter to the king, who had at least taken it under advisement. The archduchess listened, rather pale.

"Madame, after centuries of independence we now face a crisis which we cannot meet alone. Believe me, I know of what I speak. Untied, we could stand against the world. But a divided kingdom, a disloyal and discontented people, spells the end."

And at last he convinced her. But, because she was built of a contrary mold, she voiced an objection, not to the scheme, but to Karl himself. "I dislike him. He is arrogant and stupid."

"But powerful, madame. And—what else is there to do?"

There was nothing else, and she knew it. But she refused to broach the matter to Hedwig.

And it ended with the chancellor, looking most ferocious but inwardly uneasy, undertaking to put, as one may say, a flea into the Princess Hedwig's small ear.

As he strode out, the door into the next room closed quietly.

CHAPTER IV.

The Letter.

The Countess Loschek was alone. Alone and storming. She had sent her

maid away with a sharp word, and now she was pacing the floor.

Hedwig, of all people! She hated her. She had always hated her. For her youth, first; later, when she saw how things were going, for the accident that had made her a granddaughter to the king.

And Karl! Even this last June, when Karl had made his looked-for visit to the summer palace where the court had been in residence, he had already had the thing in mind. Even when his arms had been about her, Olga Loschek, he had been looking over her shoulder, as it were, at Hedwig. He had had it all in his wicked head, even then. For Karl was wicked. She loathed him while she loved him.

Hedwig would marry Karl. She might be troublesome, would indeed almost certainly be troublesome. Strangely enough, the countess hated her the more for that. To value so lightly the thing for which Olga Loschek would have given her soul, this in itself was hateful. But there was more. The countess saw much with her curiously wide, almost childishly blank eyes; it was only now that it occurred to her to turn what she knew of Hedwig and Nikky to account.

She stopped pacing the floor, and sat down. Suppose Hedwig and Nikky Larisch went away together? Hedwig, she felt, would have the courage even for that. That would stop things. But Hedwig did not trust her. And there was about Nikky a dog-like quality of devotion, which warned her that, the deeper his love for Hedwig, the more unlikely he would be to bring her to disgrace. Nikky might be difficult.

She must try for Hedwig's confidence! But Karl! How to reach him? Not with reproaches, not with anger. She knew her man well. To hold him off was the first thing. To postpone the formal proposal, and gain time. If the chancellor had been right, and things were as bad as they appeared, the king's death would precipitate a crisis. Might, indeed, overturn the throne.

The king was very feeble. This affair of yesterday had told on him. The gossip of the court was that the day had seen a change for the worse. His heart was centered on the crown prince.

Ah, here was another viewpoint. Suppose the crown prince had not come back? What would happen, with the king dead, and no king? Chaos, of course. A free hand to revolution. Hedwig fighting for her throne, and inevitably losing it.

But that was further than she cared to go just then. She would finish certain work that she had set out to do, and then she was through. No longer would dread and terror grip her in the night hours.

But she would finish. Karl should never say she had failed him. She had in her possession papers for which she waited or pretended to wait: data secured by means she did not care to remember; plans and figures carefully compiled—a thousand deaths in one. If they were found on her. She would get them out of her hands at once.

It was still but little after five. She brought her papers together on her small mahogany desk, from such hiding places as women know—the linings of perfumed sachets, the toes of small slippers, the secret pocket in a muff; and having locked her doors, put them in order. Her hands were trembling, but she worked skillfully. She was free until the dinner hour, but she had a great deal to do. The papers in order, she went to a panel in the wall of her dressing room, and sliding it aside, revealed the safe in which her jewels were kept. Not that her jewels were very valuable, but the safe was there, and she used it.

The countess took out a jewel-case, emptied it, lifted its chamoté cushions, and took out a small book. It was an indifferent hiding place, but long immaturity had made her careless. Referring to the book, she wrote a letter in code. It was, to all appearances, a friendly letter referring to a family in her native town, and asking that the recipient see that assistance be sent them before Thursday of the following week. The assistance was specified with much detail—at her expense to send so many blankets, so many loaves of bread, a long list. Having finished, she destroyed, by burning, a number of papers, watching until the last ash had turned from

dull red to smoking gray. The code book she hesitated over, but at last, with a shrug of her shoulders, she returned it to its hiding place in the jewel-case.

Coupled with her bitterness was a sense of relief. Only when the papers were destroyed had she realized the weight they had been. She summoned Minna, her maid, and dressed for the street. Then, Minna accompanying her, she summoned her carriage and went shopping.

She reached the palace again in time to dress for dinner. Somewhere on that excursion she had left the letter, to be sent to its destination over the border by special messenger that night.

Prince Ferdinand William Otto, at the moment of her return, was preparing for bed. He washed himself, with Oskar standing by, holding a great soft towel. Even the towels were too large. And he brushed his teeth, and had two drinks of water, because a stiff feeling in his throat persisted. And at last he crawled up into the high bed that was so much too big for him, and had to crawl out again, because he had forgotten his prayers.

When everything was done, and the hour of putting out the light could no longer be delayed, he said good night to Oskar, who bowed. There was a great deal of bowing in Otto's world. Then, whist! It was dark, with only the moon face of the cathedral clock for company. And as it was now twenty minutes past seven, the two hands drooped until it looked like a face with a cruel mouth, and was really very poor company.

Oskar, having bowed himself into the corridor and past the two sentries, reported to a very great dignitary across the hall that his royal highness the Crown Prince Ferdinand William Otto was in bed. And the dignitary had a chance to go away and get his dinner.

But alone in his great bed, the crown prince was shedding a few shamefaced tears. He was extremely ashamed of them. He felt that under no circumstances would his soldier father have behaved so. He reached up and secured one of the two clean folded handkerchiefs that were always placed on the bedside stand at night, and blew his nose very loudly. But he could not sleep.

He gave Miss Braithwaite time to go to her sitting room, and for eight o'clock to pass, because once every hour, all night, a young gentleman of the court, appointed for this purpose and dubbed a "wet nurse" by jealous comrades, cautiously opened his door and made a stealthy circuit of the room, to see that all was well.

The crown prince got up. He neglected to put on his bedroom slippers, of course, and in his bare feet he padded across the room to the study door. It was not entirely dark. A night light burned there. It stood on a table directly under the two crossed swords. Beneath the swords, in a burnt wood frame, were the pictures of his father and mother. Hedwig had given him a wood-burning outfit at Christmas, and he had done the work himself. It consisted of the royal arms, somewhat out of drawing and not exactly in the center of the frame, and a floral border of daisies, extremely geometrical, because he had drawn them in first with a compass.

The boy, however, gave the pictures only a hasty glance and proceeded, in a businesslike manner, to carry a straight chair to the cabinet. On the top shelf sat the old cloth dog. Its shoe-button eyes looked glazed with sleep, but its ears were quite alert. Very cautiously the crown prince unlocked the door, stepped precariously to the lower shelf of the cabinet, hung there by one royal hand, and lifted the dog down.

At nine o'clock the wet nurse took off his sword in another room and leaned it against a chair. Then he examined his revolver, in accordance with a formula prescribed by the old king. Then he went in and examined the room with a flashlight, and listened to the crown prince's breathing. He had been a croupy baby. And, at last, he turned the flashlight on to the bed. A pair of shoe-button eyes stared at him from the pillow.

"Well, I'm—!" said the wet nurse. And went out, looking thoughtful.

In a shop where, that afternoon, the countess had purchased some Lyons silks, one of the clerks, Peter Niburg, was free at last. At seven o'clock, having put away the last rolls of silk on the shelves behind him, and covered them with calico to keep off the dust; having given a final glance of disdain at the clerk in the line, across; having reached under the counter for his stiff black hat of good quality and his silver-topped cane; having donned the hat and hung the stick to his arm with two swaggering gestures; having prepared his offensive, so to speak, he advanced.

Between Peter Niburg and Herman Spier of the line, was a feud. Its source, in the person of a pretty cashier, had gone, but the feud remained. It was of the sort that smiles

with the lips and scowls with the eyes, that speaks pleasantly quite awful things, although it was Peter Niburg who did most of the talking.

And Herman hated Peter. The cashier was gone, had married a restaurant keeper, and already she waxed fat. But Herman's hatred grew with the days. And business being bad, much of the time he stood behind his line, and thought about a certain matter, which was this:

How did Peter Niburg do it? They were paid the same scant wage. Each Monday they stood together, Peter smiling and he frowning, and received into open palms exactly enough to live on, without extras. And each Monday Peter pocketed his cheerfully, and went back to his post, twirling his mustache as though all the money of the realm jingled in his trousers.

To accept the inevitable, to smile over one's poverty, that is one thing. But there was more to it. Peter made his money go amazingly far. It was Peter, for instance, who the summer before, the American Scenic Railway had opened to the public, with much crossing of flags, the national emblem and the stars and stripes, it was Peter who had invited the lady to an evening of thrills on that same railway at a definite sum per thrill.

It was Peter, then, who made the impossible possible, who wore good clothes and did not have his boots patched, who went, rumor said, to the opera now and then, and followed the score on his own battered copy.

How? Herman Spier had suspected him of many things; had secretly audited his cash slips; had watched him for surreptitious parcels of silk. Once he had thought he had him. But the package of Lyons silk, opened by the proprietor at Herman's suggestion, proved to be material for a fancy waistcoat, and paid for by Peter Niburg's own hand.

With what? Herman stood confused, even confounded, but still suspicious. And now, this very day, he had stumbled on something. A great lady from the court had made a purchase, and had left, under a roll of silk, a letter. There was no mistake. And Peter Niburg had put away the silk, and pocketed the letter, after a swift glance over the little shop.

An intrigue, then, with Peter Niburg as the go-between, or—something else. Something vastly more important, the discovery of which would bring Herman prominence beyond his fellows in a certain secret order to which he belonged.

In a way, he was a stupid man, this pale-eyed clerk who sold the quaint red and yellow cottons of the common people side by side with the heavy linens that furnished forth the tables of the rich. But hatred gave him wits. Gave him speed, too. He was only thirty feet behind Peter Niburg when that foppish gentleman reached the corner.

Herman was skilled in certain matters. He knew, for instance, that a glance into a shop window, a halt to tie a shoe, may be a ruse for passing a paper to other hands. But Peter did not stop. He went, not more swiftly than usual, to his customary

restaurant, one which faced over the square and commanded a view of the palace. And there he settled himself in a window and ordered his dinner.

From the outside Herman stared in. He lurked in the shadows outside, and watched.

Peter sat alone, and stared out. Herman took shelter, and watched. But Peter Niburg did not see him. His eyes were fixed on the gloomy

mass across, shot with small lights from deep windows, which was the palace.

Peter was calm. He had carried many such letters as the one now hidden in his breast pocket. No conscience stirred in him. If he did not do this work, others would.

He had until midnight. At that hour a messenger would receive the letter from him in the colonnade of the cathedral. On this night, each week, the messenger waited. Sometimes there was a letter, sometimes none. That was all. It was amazing, simple, and for it one received the difference between penury and comfort.

Seeing Peter settled, a steaming platter before him, Herman turned and hurried through the night. This which he had happened on was a big thing, too big for him alone. Two heads were better than one. He would take advice.

Off the main avenue he fell into a smart trot. The color came to his pale cheeks. A cold sweat broke out over him. He was short of wind from many cigarettes. But at last he reached the house.

Black Humbert was not in his bureau, behind the grating. With easy familiarity Herman turned to a door beyond and entered. A dirty little room, it was littered now with the preparations for a meal. On the bare table were a loaf, a jug of beer, and a dish of fried veal. The conierge was at the stove making gravy in a frying pan—a huge man, bearded and heavy of girth, yet stepping lightly, like a cat. A dark man and called "the black," he yet revealed, on full glance, eyes curiously pale and fat.

No greeting passed between them. Humbert gave his visitor a quick glance. Herman closed the door, and wiped out the band of his hat. The conierge poured the gravy over the meat.

"I have discovered something," Herman said. "As to its value, I know nothing, or its use to us."

"Let me judge that."

"It is a matter of a letter."

"Sit down, man, and tell it. Or do you wish me to draw the information, like bad teeth?"

"A letter from the palace," said Herman. And explained.

Black Humbert listened. He was skeptical, but not entirely incredulous. He knew the court—none better. The women of the court wrote many letters. He saw a number of them, through one of his men in the post office. There were many intrigues. After all, who could blame them? The court was dreary enough these days, and if they chose to amuse themselves as best they could—one must make allowances.

"A liaison!" he said at last, with his mouth full. "The countess is handsome, and bored. Annunziata is driving her to wickedness, as she drove her husband. But it is worth consideration. Even the knowledge of an intrigue is often helpful. Of what size was the letter?"

"A small envelope. I saw no more."

"So." The big man rose, and untied his soiled apron. "Go back," he said, "and enter the restaurant. Order a small meal, that you may have finished when he does. Leave with him and suggest the Hungary."

"Hungaria! I have no money."

"You will need no money. Now, mark this: At a certain corner you will be attacked and robbed. A mere formality, he added, as he saw Herman's pallid face go whiter. "For the real envelope will be substituted another. In his breast pocket, you said. Well, then suggest going to his room. He may," added the conierge grimly, "require your assistance. Leave him at his lodging, but watch the house. It is important to know to whom he delivers these letters."

As the man stood, he seemed to the cowering Herman to swell until he dominated the room. He took on authority. To Herman came suddenly the memory of a hidden room, and many men, and one, huge and towering, who held the others in the hollow of his hand. Back went Herman over his earlier route. But now he did not run. His craven knees shook beneath him. Fresh sweat, not of haste but of fear, broke out over him. He who was brave enough of tongue in the meetings, who was capable of rising to heights of cruelty that amounted to ferocity when one of a mob, was a coward alone.

However, the sight of the restaurant, and of his fellow clerk eating calmly, quieted him. Peter Niburg was still alone. Herman took a table near him, and ordered a bowl of soup. His hands shook, but the hot food revived him. After all, it was simple enough. But, of course, it hinged entirely on his fellow clerk's agreeing to accompany him.

He glanced across. Peter Niburg was eating, but his eyes were fixed on Madame Marie, at her high desk. There was speculation in them, and something else. Triumph, perhaps.

Suddenly Herman became calm. Calm with hate.

And, after all, it was very easy. Peter Niburg was lonely. The burden of the letter oppressed him. He wanted the comfort of human conversation and the reassurance of a familiar face. When the two met at the rack by the door which contained their hats, his expression was almost friendly. They went out together.

"A fine night," said Herman, and cast an eye at the sky.

"Fine enough."

"Too good to waste in sleep. I was thinking," observed Herman, "of an hour or two at the Hungaria."

The Hungaria! Something in Peter's pleasure-hungry heart leaped, but he mocked his fellow clerk.

"Since when," he inquired, "have you frequented the Hungaria?"

"I feel in the mood," was the somewhat sullen reply. "I work hard enough, God knows, to have a little pleasure now and then." Danger was making him shrewd. He turned away from Peter Niburg, then faced him again. "If you care to come," he suggested. "Not a supper, you understand, but a glass of wine, Italian champagne," he added.

Peter Niburg was fond of sweet champagne.

Quietly he pushed his hat to the back of his head, and hung his stick over his forearm. After all, why not? Marie was gone. Let the past die. If Herman could make the first move, let him, Peter, make the second. He linked arms with his old enemy.

"A fine night," he said.

CHAPTER V.

The Right to Live and Love.

Dinner was over in the dull old dining room. The Archduchess Annunziata lighted a cigarette, and glanced across the table at Hedwig.

Hedwig had been very silent during the meal. She had replied civilly



"Since When," He Inquired, "Have You Frequented the Hungaria?"

when spoken to, but that was all. Her mother, who had caught the countess' trick of narrowing her eyes, inspected her from under lowered lids.

"Well?" she said. "Are you still sulky?"

"I? Not at all, mother." Her head went up, and she confronted her mother squarely.

"I should like to inquire, if I may," observed the archduchess, "just how you have spent the day. This morning, for instance?"

Hedwig shrugged her shoulders, but her color rose.

"I rode."

"Where?"

"At the riding school, with Otto."

"Only with Otto?"

"Captain Larisch was there."

"Of course! Then you have practically spent the day with him!"

"I have spent most of the day with Otto."

"This devotion to Otto—it is new, I think. You were eager to get out of the nursery. Now, it appears, you must fly back to schoolroom teas and other absurdities. I should like to know why."

"I think Otto is lonely, mother."

The archduchess was in one of her sudden moods of irritation. Hedwig's remark about Otto's loneliness, the second that day, struck home. In her anger she forgot her refusal to the chancellor.

"I have something to say that will put an end to this sentimental nonsense of yours, Hedwig. I should forbid your seeing this boy, this young Larisch, if I felt it necessary. I do not. You would probably see him anyhow, for that matter." She rose, and threw her bolt out of a clear sky.

"It is unnecessary to remind you not to make a fool of yourself. But it may not be out of place to say that your grandfather has certain plans for you that will take your mind away from this silly boy, soon enough."

Hedwig had risen, and was standing, very white, with her hands on the table. "What plans, mother?"

"He will tell you."

"Not—I am not to be married?"

The Archduchess Annunziata was not all hard. She could never forgive her children their father. But they were her children, and Hedwig was all that she was not, gentle and round and young. Suddenly something almost like regret stirred in her.

"Don't look like that, child," she said. "It is not settled. And, after all, one marriage or another—what difference does it make? Men are men. If one does not care, it makes the things they do unimportant."

"But surely," Hedwig gasped, "surely I shall be consulted?"

Annunziata shook her head. They had all risen. As for Olga Loschek, she was very still, but her eyes burned.

The message of the countess to King Karl is stolen and causes a lot of trouble for several people. Read about it in the next installment.

(TO BE CONTINUED)