

# LONG LIVE THE KING

By MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

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## NIKKY FINDS HIMSELF IN A SERIOUS PREDICAMENT AS A RESULT OF HIS FOOLISHNESS.

**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. Countess Loschek, lady-in-waiting to Princess Annunziata, Hedwig's mother, is in love with King Karl and plots to prevent his marriage to Hedwig. Hedwig, who loves Nikky Larisch, Otto's aid de camp, is dismayed when told of the plans for her marriage. Countess Loschek sends a secret message to King Karl. The messenger is attacked by agents of the terrorists and a dummy letter substituted. Captain Larisch, unaware of the substitution, holds up Karl's chauffeur and secures the envelope.

### CHAPTER VI—Continued.

The chancellor was in his old smoking coat and slippers. He made an effort to don his tunic, but Hedwig, on Mathilde's heels, caught him in the act. And, after a glance at her face, he relinquished the idea, bowed over her hand, and drew up a chair for her.

And that was how the chancellor of the kingdom learned that Captain Larisch, aide-de-camp to his royal highness the crown prince, had disappeared.

"I am afraid it is serious," she said, watching him with wide, terrified eyes. "I know more than you think I do. I— we hear things, even in the palace. Irony here, but unconscious. I know that there is trouble. And it is not like Captain Larisch to desert his post."

"A boyish escapade, highness," said the chancellor. But in the twilight, he gripped hard at the arms of his chair. "He will turn up, very much ashamed of himself, tonight or tomorrow."

"That is what you want to believe. You know better."

He leaned back in his chair and considered her from under his heavy brows. Nikky gazed, perhaps to join the others who, one by one, had felt the steel of the terrorists. And this girl, on whom so much hung, sitting there, a figure of young tragedy.

"Highness," he said at last, "if the worst has happened—and that I do not believe—it will be because there is trouble, as you have said. Sooner or later, we who love our country must make sacrifices for it. Most of all, those in high places will be called upon. And among them you may be asked to help."

"If? What can I do?" But she knew, and the chancellor saw that she knew.

"It is Karl, then?"

"It may be King Karl, Hedwig."

Hedwig rose, and the chancellor got heavily to his feet. She was fighting for calmness, and she succeeded very well. After all, if Nikky were gone, what did it matter? Only—

"There are so many of you," she said, rather pitifully. "And you are all so powerful. And against you there is only—me."

"Why against us, highness?"

"Because," said Hedwig—"because I care for some one else, and I shall care for him all the rest of my life, even if he never comes back. You may marry me to whom you please, but I shall go on caring. I shall never forget. And I shall make Karl the worst wife in the world, because I hate him."

She opened the door and went out without ceremony, because she was hard driven and on the edge of tears.

That night, the city was searched for Nikky Larisch, but without result.

### CHAPTER VII.

**Nikky Does a Reckless Thing.**  
Nikky Larisch had been having an exciting time.

First of all, he exchanged garments with the chauffeur, and cursed his own long legs, which proved difficult to cover adequately. But the chauffeur's long fur ulster helped considerably. The exchange was rather a ticklish matter, and would have been more so had he not found a revolver in the fur coat pocket.

Behold, then, Nikky of the brave heart standing over his prostrate prisoner, and rolling him, mummy fashion, in his own tunic and a rug from the machine.

"It is cold, my friend," he said briefly; "but I am a kindly soul, and if you have told me the truth, you will not have so much as a snuff to remind you of this tomorrow."

"I have told the truth."

"As a soldier, of course," Nikky went on, "I think you have made a mistake. You should have chosen the precipice. But as a private gentleman, I think you."

Having examined the knots in the rope, which were very well done, indeed, and having gagged the chauffeur securely, Nikky prepared to go. In his

goggles, with the low-voiced cap and fur coat, he looked not unlike his late companion. But he had a jaunty step as he walked toward the car, a bit of swagger that covered, perhaps, just a trifle of uneasiness.

For Nikky now knew his destination, knew that he was bound on perilous work, and that the chances of his returning were about fifty-fifty, or rather less.

He did not know his way. Over the mountains it was plain enough, for there was but one road. After he descended into the plain of Karnia, however, it became difficult. Sign posts were few and not explicit. But at last he found the railroad, which he knew well—that railroad without objective, save as it would serve to move troops toward the border. After that Nikky found it easier.

But, with his course assured, other difficulties presented themselves. To take the letter to those who would receive it, with all that it might contain, was another. He was not brilliant, was Nikky. Only brave and simple of heart, and unversed in the ways of darkness.

If, now, he could open the letter and remove it, substituting—well, what could he substitute? There were cigarette papers in his pocket. Trust Nikky for that. But how to make the exchange?

The engine was boiling hard, a dull roaring under the hood that threatened trouble. He drew up beside the road and took off the water cap. Then he whistled. Why, of course! Had it not been done from time immemorial, this steaming of letters? He examined it. It bore no incriminating seal.

He held the envelope over the water cap, and was boyishly pleased to feel the flap loosen. After all, things were easy enough if one used one's brains. He rather regretted using almost all of his cigarette papers, of course. He had, perhaps, never heard of the drop of nicotine on the tongue of a dog.

As for the letter itself, he put it, without even glancing at it, into his cap, under the lining. Then he sealed the envelope again and dried it against one of the lamps. It looked, he reflected, as good as new.

He was extremely pleased with himself.

Before he returned to the machine he consulted his watch. It was three o'clock. True, the long early spring night gave him four more hours of darkness. But the messenger was due at three, at the hunting lodge in the mountains which was his destination. He would be, at the best, late by an hour.

On what the messenger had told him Nikky hung his hope of success. This was, briefly, that he should go to the royal shooting box at Wedeling, and should go, not to the house itself, but to the gate keeper's lodge. Here he was to leave his machine, and tap at the door. On its being opened, he was to say nothing, but to give the letter to him who opened the door. After that he was to take the machine away to the capital, some sixty miles farther on.

The message, then, was to the king himself. For Nikky, as all the world knew that Karl, with some kindred spirits, was at Wedeling, shooting. That is, if the messenger told the truth. Nikky intended to find out. He was nothing if not thorough.

When at last the lights of the lodge at the gate of Wedeling gleamed out through the trees, it was half-past three, and a wet spring snow was falling softly. In an open place Nikky looked up. The stars were gone.

The lodge now, and the gate keeper's house, Nikky's heart hammered as he left the car—hammered with nervousness, not terror. But he went boldly to the door, and knocked.

So far all was well. There were footsteps within, and a man stepped out into the darkness, closing the door behind him.

"You have the letter?" he asked.

"It is here."

"I will take it."

Nikky held it out. The man fumbled for it, took it.

"Orders have come," said the voice, "that you remain here for the night.

In the morning you are to carry dispatches to the city."

Poor Nikky! With his car facing toward the lodge, and under necessity, in order to escape, to back it out into the highway! He thought quickly. There was no chance of overpowering his man quickly and silently. And the house was not empty. From beyond the door came the sounds of men's voices, and the thud of drinking mugs on a bare table.

"You will take me up to the house, and then put the car away until morning."

Nikky breathed again. It was going to be easy, after all. If only the road went straight to the shooting box itself, the rest was simple. But he prayed that he make no false turning, to betray his ignorance.

"Very well," he said.

His companion opened the door behind him. "Ready, now," he called. "The car is here."

Two men rose from a table where they had been sitting, and put on great coats of fur. The lamp light within quivered in the wind from the open door. Nikky was quite calm now. His heart beat its regular seventy-two, and he even reflected, with a sort of grim humor, that the chancellor would find the recital of this escapade much to his taste. In a modest way Nikky felt that he was making history.

The man who had received the letter got into the machine beside him. The other two climbed into the tonneau. And, as if to make the denouement doubly ridiculous, the road led straight, Nikky, growing extremely cheerful behind his goggles, wondered how much petrol remained in the car.

The men behind talked in low tones. "They are late tonight," growled one of them, as the house appeared, full lighted. "A tardy start tomorrow again!"

"The king must have his sleep," commented the other, rather mockingly.

With a mastery sweep, Nikky drew up his machine before the entrance. Let them once a night, let him but start



"His Majesty Desires That the Messenger Come In."

his car down the road again, and all the devils of the night might follow. He feared nothing.

But here again Nikky planned too fast. The servant who came out to open the doors of the motor had brought a message. "His majesty desires that the messenger come in," was the bomb-shell which exploded in Nikky's ears.

Nikky hesitated. And then some imp of recklessness in him prompted him not to run away, but to see the thing through. It was, after all, a chance either way. These men beside the car were doubtless armed—one at least, nearest him, was certainly one of Karl's own secret agents. And, as Nikky paused, he was not certain, but it seemed to him that the man took a step toward him.

"Very well," said Nikky, grumbling. "But I have had a long ride, and a cold one. I need sleep."

Even then he had a faint hope that the others would precede him, and that it would be possible to leap back to the car, and escape. But, whether by accident or design, the group closed about him. Flight was out of the question.

A little high was Nikky's head as he went in. He had done a stupid thing now, and he knew it. He should have taken his letter and gone back with it. But, fool or not, he was a soldier. Danger made him calm.

The lodge was noisy. Loud talking, the coming and going of servants with trays, the crackle of wood fires in which whole logs were burning, and, as Nikky and his escort entered, the roaring chorus of a hunting song filled the ears.

Two of the men flung off their heavy coats, and proceeded without ceremony into the room whence the sounds is-

sued. The third, however, still holding the letter, ushered Nikky into a small side room, a sort of study, since it contained a desk. For kings must pursue their clerical occupations even on holidays.

Nikky had reluctantly removed his cap. His goggles, however, he ventured to retain. He was conscious that his guide was studying him intently. But not with suspicion, he thought. Rather as one who would gauge the caliber of the man before him. He seemed satisfied, too, for his voice, which had been curt, grew more friendly.

"You had no trouble?" he asked.

"None, sir."

"Did Niburg say anything?"

Niburg, then, was the spy of the cathedral. Nikky reflected. Suddenly he saw a way out. It was, he afterward proclaimed, not his own thought. It came to him like a message. He burned a candle to his patron saint, some time later, for it.

"The man Niburg had had an unfortunate experience, sir. He reported that, during an evening stroll, before he met me, he was attacked by three men, with the evident intention of securing the letter. He was badly beaten up."

His companion started. "Niburg," he said. "Then—" He glanced at the letter he held. "We must find some one else," he muttered. "I never trusted the fellow. A clerk, nothing else. For this work it takes wit."

Nikky, sweating with strain, felt that it did, indeed. "He was badly used up, sir," he offered. "Could hardly walk, and was still trembling with excitement when I met him."

The man touched a bell. "Tell his majesty," he said to the servant who appeared, "that his messenger is here."

The servant bowed and withdrew.

Nikky found the wait that followed trying. He thought of Hedwig, and of the little crown prince. Suddenly he knew that he had no right to attempt this thing. He had given his word, almost his oath, to the king, to protect and watch over the boy. And here he was, knowing now that mischief was afoot, and powerless. He cursed himself for his folly.

Then Karl came in. He came alone, closing the door behind him. Nikky and his companion bowed, and Nikky surveyed him through his goggles. The same mocking face he remembered, from Karl's visit to the summer palace, the same easy, graceful carriage, the same small mustache. He was in uniform and apparently in a comparatively gracious mood. He had been drinking, but he was not intoxicated. He was slightly flushed, his eyes were abnormally bright. He looked, for the moment, rather amiable. Nikky was to learn, later on, how easily his smile hardened to a terrifying grin.

He ignored Nikky's companion. "You brought a letter?"

Nikky bowed, and the other man held it out. Karl took it.

"The trip was uneventful?"

"Yes, sire."

"A bad night for it," Karl observed, and glanced at the letter in his hand. "Was there any difficulty at the frontier?"

"None, sire."

Karl tore the end of the envelope. "You will remain here tonight," he said. "Tomorrow morning I shall send dispatches to the city. I hope you have petrol. These fellows here—" He did not complete the sentence. He inserted two royal fingers into the envelope and drew out—Nikky's cigarette papers!

For a moment there was complete silence in the room. Karl turned the papers over.

It was then that his face hardened into a horrible grin. He looked up, raising his head slowly.

"What is this?" he demanded, very quietly.

"The letter, sire," said Nikky. "I—"

"The letter! Do you call these a letter?"

Nikky drew himself up. "I have brought the envelope which was given me."

Without a word Karl held out papers and envelope to the other man, who took them. Then he turned to Nikky, and now he raised his voice. "Where did you get this—hoax?" he demanded.

"At the cathedral, from the man Niburg."

"You lie!" said Karl. Then, for a moment, he left Nikky and turned on his companion in a fury. He let his royal rage beat on that unlucky individual while the agent stood, white and still. Not until it was over, and Karl, spent with passion, was pacing the floor, did Nikky venture a word.

"It is this is not what your majesty expected," he said, "there is perhaps an explanation."

Karl wheeled on him. "Explanation?"

"The man Niburg was attacked, early last evening, by three men. They beat him badly, and attempted to rob him. His story to me, sire. He believed that they were after the letter, but that he had preserved it. It is, of course, a possibility that, while he lay stunned, they substituted another envelope for the one he carried."

Karl tore the envelope from the agent's hands and inspected it carefully. Evidently, as with the agent, the story started a new train of thought. Nikky drew a long breath. After all, there was still hope that the early morning shooting would have another target than himself.

Karl sat down, and his face relaxed. It was stern, but no longer horrible. "Tell me this Niburg's story," he commanded.

"He was walking through the old city," Nikky commenced, "when three men fell on him. One, a large one, knocked him insensible and then went through his pockets. The others—"

"Strange!" said Karl. "If he was insensible, how does he know all this?"

"It was his story, sire," Nikky explained. But he colored. "A companion, who was with him, ran away."

"This companion," Karl queried, "A dark, heavy fellow, was it?"

"No. Rather a pale man, blond. A—"

Nikky checked himself.

But Karl was all suavity. "So," he said, "while Niburg was unconscious the large man took the letter, which was sealed, magically opened it, extracted its contents, replaced them with this, and then sealed it again?"

The king turned without haste to a drawer in his desk, and opened it. He was smiling. When he faced about again, Nikky saw that he held a revolver in his hand. Save that the agent had taken a step forward, nothing in the room had changed. And yet, for Nikky everything had changed.

Nikky had been a reckless fool, but he was brave enough. He smiled, a better smile than Karl's twisted one.

"I have a fancy," said King Karl, "to manage this matter for myself. Keep back, Kaiser. Now, my friend, you will give me the packet of cigarette papers you carry."

Resistance would do no good. Nikky brought them out, and Karl's twisted smile grew broader as he compared them with the ones the envelope had contained.

"You see," he said, "you show the hand of the novice. You should have thrown these away. But, of course, all your methods are wrong. Why, for instance, have you come here at all? You have my man—but that I shall take up later. We will first have the letter."

But here Nikky stood firm. Let them find the letter. He would not help them. But again he cursed himself. There had been a thousand hiding places along the road—but he must bring the incriminating thing with him, and thus condemn himself!

Now commenced a curious scene, curious because one of the actors was Karl of Karnia himself. He seemed curiously loath to bring in assistance, did Karl. Or perhaps the novelty of the affair appealed to him. And Nikky's resistance to search, with that revolver so close, was short lived.

Even while he was struggling, Nikky was thinking. Let them get the letter, if they must. Things would at least be no worse than before. But he resolved that no violence would tear from him the place where the messenger was hidden. Until they had got that, he had a chance for life.

They searched his cap last. Nikky, panting after that strange struggle, saw Kaiser take it from the lining of his cap, and pass it to the king.

Karl took it. The smile was gone now, and something ugly and terrible had taken its place. But that, too, faded as he looked at the letter.

It was a blank piece of note paper.

With the approach of the anniversary of his son's death, the king grew increasingly restless. Each year he determined to put away this old grief, and each year, as his bodily weakness increased, he found it harder to do so.

On other years he had had the crown prince with him as much as possible on this dreary day of days. But the crown prince was exiled, in disgrace. Not even for the comfort of his small presence could stern discipline be relaxed.

Annunziata was not much comfort to him. They had always differed, more or less, the truth being, perhaps, that she was too much like the king ever to sympathize fully with him. Both were arrogant, determined, obstinate. And those qualities, which age was beginning to soften in the king, were new, in Annunziata, in full strength and bloom.

But there was more than fundamental similarity at fault. Against her father the archduchess held her unhappy marriage.

And now, secretly willing that Hedwig should marry Karl, she was ready to annoy him by objecting to it.

On the day after her conversation with General Metilch, she visited the king. It was afternoon. The king had spent the morning in his study, propped with pillows as was always the case now, working with a secretary. The secretary was gone when she entered, and he sat alone.

He had passed a trying day. Once having broken down the chancellor's barrier of silence, the king had insisted on full knowledge, with the result that he had sat, aghast, amid the ruins of his former complacency. The

country and the smaller cities were comparatively quiet, so far as demonstrations against the government were concerned. But unquestionably they plotted. As for the capital, it was a seething riot of sedition, from the reports. A copy of a newspaper, secretly printed and more secretly circulated, had brought fire to the king's eyes. It lay on his knees as his daughter entered.

"Well, father," she said, looking down at him, "how do you feel?"

"Sit down," he said. The question as to his health was too perfunctory to require reply.

Annunziata sat, with a jangling of chains. She chose a straight chair, and faced him, very erect.

"How old is Hedwig?" demanded the king.

"Nineteen."

"Hedwig is old enough to marry. Her grandmother was not nineteen when I married her."

"It would be better," said Annunziata, "to marry her while she is young, before she knows any better."

"Any better than what?" inquired the king testily.

"Any better than to marry at all."

The king eyed her. She was not, then, even attempting to hide her claws. But he was an old bird, and not to be caught in an argumentative cage.

"There are several possibilities for Hedwig," he said. "I have gone into

"You Show the Hand of the Novice."

the matter pretty thoroughly. As you know, I have had this on my mind for some time. It is necessary to arrange things before I—go."

The king, of course, was neither asking nor expecting sympathy from her, but mentally, and somewhat grimly, he compared her unmoved face with that of his old friend and chancellor, only a few nights before.

"It is a regrettable fact," he went on, "that I must leave, as I shall, a sadly troubled country. But for that—"

He paused. But for that, he meant, he would gladly go. He needed rest. His spirit, still so alive, chafed daily more and more against its worn body. He believed in another life, did the old king. He wanted the hearty handclasp of his boy again. Even the wife who had married him against her will had grown close to him in later years. He needed her too. A little rest, then, and after that a new life, with those who had gone ahead.

"A sadly troubled country," he repeated.

"All countries are troubled. We are no worse than others."

"Perhaps not. But things are changing. The old order is changing. The spirit of unrest—I shall not live to see it. You may, Annunziata. But the day is coming when all thrones will totter. Like this one."

Now at last he had pierced her armor. "Like this one!"

"That is what I said. Rouse yourself, Annunziata. Leave that little boudoir of yours, with its accursed clocks and its heat and its flub-dubbery, and see what is about you! Discontent! Revolution! We are hardly safe from day to day. Do you think that what happened nine years ago was a flash that died as it came? Nonsense. Read this!"

He held out the paper and she put on her pince-nez and read its headings, a trifle disdainfully. But the next moment she rose, and stood in front of him, almost as pale as he was. "You allow this sort of thing to be published?"

"No. But it is published."

"And they dare to say things like this? Why, it is—"

"Exactly. It is, undoubtedly," he was very calm. "I would not have troubled you with it. But the situation is bad. We are rather helpless."

"Not—the army, too?"

"What can we tell? These things spread like fires. Nothing may happen for years. On the other hand, tomorrow—"

Hedwig is offered as a sacrifice to save the tottering kingdom. This act incidentally extricates Nikky from a desperate situation. Read about these developments in the next installment.

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