

# LONG LIVE THE KING

By Mary Roberts Rinehart

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## NIKKY IS TORN BETWEEN LOVE AND A SENSE OF DUTY AND LOYALTY TO HIS KING.

**Synopsis.**—Prince Ferdinand William Otto, heir to the throne of Livonia, is unaware of plots of the terrorists to form a republic. His grandfather, the king, in order to preserve the kingdom, arranges for the marriage of Princess Hedwig, Otto's cousin, to King Karl of Karnia. Hedwig rebels because of an attachment she has formed for Captain Nikky Larisch, Prince Otto's personal attendant. Countess Loschek, attached to the menage of Archduchess Annunziata, is in love with the king of Karnia, for whom she acts as spy. She is threatened by the committee of ten, leaders of the terrorists, unless she bows to the committee's will and helps to secrete the crown prince when the king, who is very ill, dies.

### CHAPTER XI.

#### As a Man May Love a Woman.

Hedwig came to tea that afternoon. She came in softly, and defiantly, for she was doing a forbidden thing, but Prince Ferdinand William Otto had put away the frame against such a contingency. He had, as a matter of fact, been putting cold cloths on Miss Braithwaite's forehead.

"I always do it," he informed Hedwig. "I like doing it. It gives me something to do. She likes them rather dry, so the water doesn't run down her neck."

Had Miss Braithwaite not been ill, Hedwig would have talked things over with her then. There was no one else to whom she could go. Hilda refused to consider the prospect of marriage as anything but pleasurable, and between her mother and Hedwig there had never been any close relationship.

But Miss Braithwaite lay motionless, her face set in lines of suffering, and after a time Hedwig rose and tiptoed out of the room.

Prince Ferdinand William Otto was excited. Hedwig had already come, and on the rare occasions when the governess was ill, it was his privilege to pour the tea.

"Nikky is coming," he said rapidly. "The three of us will have a party. Please don't tell me how you like your tea, and see if I can remember."

"Very well, dear," Hedwig said gently, and went to the window.

Nikky entered almost immediately. As a matter of fact, although he showed no trace of it, Nikky had been having an extremely bad time since his return; the chancellor, who may or may not have known that his heart was breaking, had given him a very severe scolding on the way back from Wedeling. It did Nikky good, too, for it roused him to his own defense, and made him forget, for a few minutes anyhow, that life was over for him, and that the chancellor carried his death sentence in his old leather dispatch case.

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#### ments? What an irony! What a jest!

It was true there was a change in him. He looked subdued, almost sad. "To Karnia?" she asked, when Prince Ferdinand William Otto had left the room. "Officially?"

"Not—exactly."

"Where, in Karnia?"

"I ended," Nikky confessed, "at Wedeling."

Hedwig gazed at him, her elbows propped on the tea table. "Then," she said, "I think you know."

"I know, highness."

"And you have nothing to say?"

"Highness," Nikky began huskily, "you know what I would say. And that I cannot. To take advantage of Otto's fancy for me, a child's liking to violate the confidence of those who placed me here—I am doing that, every moment."

"What about me?" Hedwig asked. "Do I count for nothing? Does it not matter at all how I feel, whether I am happy or wretched? Isn't that as important as honor?"

Nikky flung out his hands. "You know," he said rapidly. "What can I tell you that you do not know a thousand times? I love you. Not as a subject may adore his princess, but as a man loves a woman."

She drew herself up. "Love!" she said. "I do not call that love."

"It is greater love than you know," said poor Nikky. But all his courage died a moment later, and his resolution with it, for without warning Hedwig dropped her head on her hands and, crouching forlornly, fell to sobbing.

"I counted on you," she said wildly. "And you are like the others. No one cares how wretched I am. I wish I might die."

Then indeed Nikky was lost. In an instant he was on his knees beside her, his arms close about her, his head bowed against her breast. And Hedwig relaxed to his embrace. When at last he turned and looked up at her, it was Hedwig who bent and kissed him.

"At least," she whispered, "we have had this. We can always remember, whatever comes, that we have had this."

But Nikky was of very human stuff, and not the sort that may live by memories. He was very haggard when he rose to his feet—haggard, and his mouth was doggedly set. "I will never give you up, now," he said.

Brave words, of course. But as he said them he realized their futility.

The following morning the Countess Loschek left for a holiday. She had the choice of but two alternatives, to do as she had been commanded, for it amounted to that, or to die. The committee would not kill her, in case she failed them. It would be unnecessary. Enough that they place the letter and the code in the hands of the authorities, by some anonymous means. Well enough she knew the chancellor's inflexible anger, and the Archduchess Annunziata's cold rage. They would sweep her away with a gesture, and she would die the death of all traitors.

A week! Time had been when a week of the dragging days at the palace had seemed eternity. Now the hours flew. The gold clock on her dressing table, a gift from the archduchess, marked them with flying hands.

During the afternoon came a package, rather unskillfully tied with a gift cord. Opening it, the countess disclosed a glove box of wood, with a design of rather shabby violets burnt into the cover. Inside was a note:

I am very sorry you are sick. This is to put your gloves in when you travel. Please excuse the work. I have done it in a hurry.

FERDINAND WILLIAM OTTO.

Suddenly the countess laughed, choking hysterical laughter that alarmed Minna; horrible laughter, which left her paler than ever, and gasping.

The old castle of the Loscheks looked grim and inhospitable when she reached it that night. Built during the years when the unbeliever overran southern Europe, it stood in a commanding position over a valley, and a steep, walled road led up to it.

But, its ancient glory and good reputation departed, its garrison gone, its drawbridge and moat things of the past, its very hangings and furnishings moldering from long neglect, it hung over the valley, a past menace, an empty threat.

To this dreary refuge the countess had fled. She wanted the silence of its still rooms in which to think. Wretched herself, its wretchedness called her. As the carriage which had brought her from the railway turned into its woods, and she breathed the pungent odor of pine and balsam, she relaxed for the first time.

Why was she so hopeless? She could escape. She knew the woods well. None who followed her could know them so well. She would get away, and somewhere, in a new world,

remain with the crown prince." Then, seeing that she still did not comprehend, he explained, swiftly. He stood, as many a man has stood before, between love and loyalty to his king, and he was a soldier. He had no choice.

It was terrible to him to see the light die out of her eyes. But even as he told her of the dangers that compassed the child and possibly others of the family, he saw that they touched her remotely, if at all.

All she said, when Nikky finished, was: "I might have known it. Of course they would get me, as they did the others." But a moment later she rose and threw out her arms. "How skillful they are! They knew about it. It is all a part of the plot. They made you promise never to desert Otto, so that their arrangements need not be interfered with. Oh, I know them, better than you do. They are all cruel. It is the blood."

That evening the Princess Hedwig went unannounced to her grandfather's apartment, and demanded to be allowed to enter.

A gentleman in waiting bowed deeply, but stood before the door. "Your highness must pardon my reminding your highness," he said firmly, "that no one may enter his majesty's presence without permission."

"Then go in," said Hedwig, in a white rage, "and get the permission."

The gentleman in waiting went in, very deliberately, because his dignity was outraged. The moment he had gone, however, Hedwig flung the door open, and followed, standing a figure of tragic defiance, inside the heavy curtains of the king's bedroom.

"There is no use saying you won't see me, grandfather. For here I am."

They eyed each other, the one, it must be told, a trifle uneasily, the other desperately. Then into the king's eyes came a flash of admiration, and just a gleam of amusement.

"So I perceive," he said. "Come here, Hedwig."

A sister of charity was standing by the king's bed. She had cared for him through many illnesses. In the intervals she retired to her cloister and read holy books and sewed for the poor.

The sister went out, her black habit dragging, but she did not sew. Some time later she heard bitter crying in the royal bed chamber, and the king's tones, soothing now and very sad.

"There is a higher duty than happiness," he said. "There are greater things than love. And one day you will know this."

When she went in Hedwig had gone, and the old king, lying in his bed, was looking at the portrait of his dead son.

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make a fresh start. Surely, after all, peace was the greatest thing in the world.

The carriage drove on; Minna, on the box, crossed herself at sight of the church, and chatted with the driver, a great figure who crowded her to the very edge of the seat.

"I am glad to be here," she said. "I am sick of grandeur. My home is in Etzel." She turned and inspected the man beside her. "You are a newcomer, I think?"

"I have but just come to Etzel."

"Then you cannot tell me about my people." She was disappointed.

"And you," inquired the driver, "you will stay for a visit?"

"A week only. But better than nothing."

"After that, you return to the city?"

"Yes, Madame the countess—you would know, if you were Etzel-born—madame the countess is lady in waiting to her royal highness, the Archduchess Annunziata."

"So!" said the driver. But he was not curious, and the broken road demanded his attention. He was but newly come, so very newly that he did not know his way, and once made a wrong turning.

The countess relaxed. She slept that night.

When she had breakfasted and dressed, she went out on a balcony, and looked down at the valley. Her eyes dropped to the old wall below, where in the sunshine the caretaker was beating a rug. Close to him, in intimate and cautious conversation, was the driver of the night before. Glancing up, they saw her and at once separated.

Gone was peace, then. The countess knew—knew certainly. "Our eyes see everywhere." Eyes, indeed—eyes that even now the caretaker raised furtively from his rug.

Nevertheless, the countess was minded to experiment, to be certain. For none is so suspicious, she knew, as one who fears suspicion. None so guilty as the guilty. During the forenoon she walked through the woods, going briskly, with vigorous, mountain-bred feet. No crackle of underbrush disturbed her. Swift turnings revealed no lurking figures skulking behind the trunks of trees. But where an ancient stone bridge crossed a mountain stream, she came on the huge driver of the night before reflectively fishing.

He saluted her gravely, and the countess paused and looked at him. "You have caught no fish, my friend?" she said.

"No, madame. But one plays about my book."

She turned back. Eyes everywhere, and arms, great hairy arms. And feet that, for all their size, must step lightly!

On the second day she made a desperate resolve, and characteristically put it into execution at once. She sent for the caretaker. When he came, uneasy for the Loscheks were justly feared in the countryside, and even the thing of which he knew gave him small courage, she lost no time in evasion.

"Go," she said, "and bring here your accomplice."

"My accomplice, madame! I do not—"

"You heard me," she said.

He turned, half sullen, half terrified, and paused. "Which do you refer to, madame?"

She had seen only the one. Then there were others. Who could tell how many others?

"The one who drove here."

So he went, leaving her to desperate reflection. When he returned, it was to usher in the heavy figure of the spy.

"Which of you is in authority?" she demanded.

"I, madame." It was the spy who spoke.

She dismissed the caretaker with a gesture.

"Have you any discretion over me? Or must you refer matters to those who sent you?"

"I must refer to them."

"How long will it take to send a message and receive a reply?"

He considered. "Until tomorrow night, madame."

Another day gone, then, and nothing determined!

"Now, listen," she said, "and listen carefully. I have come here to decide a certain question. Whether you know what that question is or not, does not matter. But before I decide it I must take a certain journey. I wish to make that journey. It is into Karnia."

She watched him. "It is impossible. My instructions—"

"I am not asking your permission. I wish to send a letter to the committee. They, and they alone, will determine this thing. Will you send the letter?"

When he hesitated, perplexed, she got up and moved to her writing table. "I shall write the letter," she said haughtily. "See that it is sent. When I report at the end of the time that I have sent such a letter, you can judge better than I the result if it has not been received."

He was still dubious, but she wrote

the letter and gave it to him, her face proud and scornful. But she was not easy, for all that, and she watched from her balcony to see if any messenger left the castle and descended the mountain road. She was rewarded, an hour later, by seeing a figure leave the old gateway and start afoot toward the village, a pale faced man with colorless hair. A part of the hidden guard that surrounded her, she knew, and somehow familiar. But, although she racked her brains, she could not remember where she had seen him.

That day, toward evening, the huge man presented himself. He brought no

observed the chancellor. "He is forty, sir."

"Aye," said the king. "And at forty a bad man changes his nature, and purifies himself in marriage! Nonsense, Karl will be as he has always been. But we have gone into this before. Only, I am sorry for Hedwig. Get rid of this young Larisch."

The chancellor sat reflecting, his chin dropped forward on his breast. "Otto will miss him."

"Well, out with it. I may not dismiss him. What, then?"

"It is always easy to send men away. But it is sometimes better to retain them, and force them to your will. We have here an arrangement that is satisfactory. Larisch is keen, young, and loyal. Hedwig has thrown herself at him. For that, sir, she is responsible, not he."

"Then get rid of her," growled the king.

The chancellor rose. "If the situation is left to me, sir," he said, "I will promise two things. That Otto will keep his friend, and that the Princess Hedwig will bow to your wishes without further argument."

"Do it, and God help you," said the king, again with the flicker of amusement.

The chancellor had gone home, walking heavily along the darkening streets. Once again he had conquered. The reins remained in his guarded old hands. And he was about to put the honor of the country into the keeping of the son of Maria Menrad, whom he had once loved.

So now he sat in his study, and waited. When he heard Nikky's quick step as he came along the tile passage, he picked up his pipe.

Nikky saluted, and made his way across the room in the twilight, with the ease of familiarity. "I am late, sir," he apologized. "We found our man, and he is safely jailed. He made no resistance."

"Sit down," said the chancellor. And, touching a bell, he asked Mathilde for coffee. "So we have him," he reflected. "The next thing is to discover if he knows who his assailants were. That, and the person for whom he acted—however, I sent for you for another reason. What is this about the Princess Hedwig?"

"The Princess Hedwig?"

"What folly, boy! A young girl who cannot know her own mind! And for such a bit of romantic trifling you would ruin yourself. It is ruin. You know that."

Nikky remained silent, a little sullen.

"The princess went to the king with her story this evening." The boy started. "A cruel proceeding, but the result is always cruel. The expected result has followed: The king wishes you sent away."

"I am at his command, sir."

The chancellor filled his pipe from a bowl near by, working deliberately. Nikky sat still, rather rigid.

"May I ask," he said at last, "that you say to the king that the responsibility is mine? No possible blame can attach to the Princess Hedwig. I love her, and—I am not clever. I show what I feel."

"The immediate result" said the chancellor cruelly, "will doubtless be a putting forward of the date of her marriage." Nikky's hands clenched. "A further result would be your dismissal from the army. One does not do such things as you have done, lightly."

"Lightly" said Nikky Larisch. "Heaven!"

"But," continued the chancellor, "I have a better way. I have faith, for one thing, in your blood. The son of Maria Menrad must be—his mother's son. And the crown prince is attached to you. Not for your sake, but for his, I am inclined to be lenient. What I shall demand for that leniency is that no word of love again pass between you and the Princess Hedwig."

"It would be easier to go away."

Nikky closed his eyes. It was getting to be a habit, just as some people crack their knuckles.

"We need our friends about us," the chancellor continued. "The carnival is coming, always a dangerous time for us. The king grows weaker day by day. A crisis is impending for all of us, and we need you."

Nikky rose, steady enough now, but white to the lips.

"I give my word, sir," he said. "I shall say no word of—of how I feel to Hedwig. Not again. She knows—and I think," he added proudly, "that she knows I shall not change. That I shall always—"

"Exactly" said the chancellor. It was the very pitch of the king's dry old voice. "Of course she knows, being a woman. And now, good night."

The king recommends that Prince Otto study the utterances of—now whom, do you suppose? You couldn't guess in a hundred years. You will find out in the next installment.