

Long Live the King

By MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

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COUNTESS LOSCHEK'S SECRET MESSAGE CAUSES A LOT OF TROUBLE FOR SEVERAL PEOPLE

Synopsis.—The crown prince of Livonia, Ferdinand William Otto, ten years old, faked 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. She sends a secret message to King Karl.

CHAPTER V.—Continued.

"Mother, you cannot look back, and—remember your own life, and allow me to be wretched. You cannot!"

Hedwig began to cry.

The archduchess hated tears, and her softer moments were only moments. "Dry your eyes, and don't be silly," she said coldly. "You have always known that something of the sort was inevitable."

She moved toward the door. The two princesses and her lady in waiting remained still until she had left the table. Then they fell in behind her, and the little procession moved to the stuffy boudoir, for coffee. But Hilda slipped her arm around her sister's waist, and the touch comforted Hedwig.

"He may be very nice," Hilda volunteered cautiously. "Perhaps it is Karl. I am quite mad about Karl, myself."

Hedwig, however, was beyond listening. She went slowly to a window, and stood gazing out. Looming against the sky-line, in the very center of the place, was the heroic figure of her dead grandmother. She fell to wondering about these royal women who had preceded her mother, frankly unhappy in her marriage, permanently embittered by her grandmother. Hedwig had never seen the king young. She could not picture him as a lover. To her he was a fine and lonely figure. But romantic? Had he ever been romantic?

She slipped out onto the balcony and closed the curtains behind her. As her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness she saw that there was some one below, under the trees. Her heart beat rapidly. In a moment she was certain. It was Nikky down there. Nikky, gazing up at her as a child may look at a star. With a quick gesture Hedwig drew the curtain back. A thin ray of light fell on her, on her slim bare arms, on her light draperies, on her young face. He had wanted to see her, and he should see her. Then she dropped the curtain, and twisted her hands together lest, in spite of her, they reach out toward him.

Did she fancy it, or did the figure salute her? Then came the quick ring of heels on the old stone pavement. She knew his footsteps, even as she knew every vibrant, eager inflection of his voice. He went away, across the square, like one who, having bent his knee to a saint, turns back to the business of the world.

In the boudoir the archduchess had picked up some knitting to soothe her jangled nerves. "You may play now, Hilda," she said.

Annunziata dozed, and Hilda played softly. The countess's opportunity had come. She put down the dreary embroidery with which she filled the dreariest evenings, and moved to the window. She walked quietly, like a cat.

Her first words to Hedwig were those of Peter Niburg as he linked arms with his enemy and started down the street. "A fine night, highness," she said.

Hedwig raised her eyes to the stars. "It is very lovely."

"A night to spend out-of-doors, instead of being shut up—" She finished her sentence with a shrug of the shoulders.

Hedwig was not fond of the countess. She did not know why. The truth being, of course, that between them lay the barrier of her own innocence. When the countess's arm touched her, she drew aside.

"Tonight," said the lady in waiting dreamily, "I should like to be in a motor, speeding over mountain roads. I came from the mountains, you know. And I miss them."

Hedwig moved, a little impatiently, but as the countess went on, she listened. After all, Nikky, too, came from the mountains. And because she was sorry for the countess, who was homesick, and perhaps because just then she had to speak to some one, she turned to her at last with the thing that filled her mind.

"This marriage," she said bitterly.

"Is it talked about? Am I the only one in the palace who has not known about it?"

"No, highness, I had heard nothing. Of course, there are always rumors."

"As to the other, the matter may

mother referred to," Hedwig held her head very high. "I—she was unjust. Am I never to have any friends?"

"Friends, highness? One may have friends, of course. It is not friendship they fear."

"What then?"

"A lover," said the countess softly. "It is impossible to see Captain Larisch in your presence, and not realize—"

"Go on."

"And not realize, highness, that he is in love with you."

"How silly!" said the Princess Hedwig, with glowing eyes.

"But highness!" implored the countess. "If only you would use a little caution. Open defiance is its own defeat."

"I am not ashamed of what I do," said Hedwig hotly.

"Ashamed! Of course not. But things that are harmless in others in your position—you are young. You should have friends, gayety. I am," she smiled grimly in the darkness, "not so old myself but that I can understand."

Hedwig stood still. The old city was preparing for sleep. In the place a few lovers loitered, standing close, and the faint tinkling of a bell told of the Blessed Sacrament being carried through the streets to some bedside of the dying. The Princess Hedwig bowed her head.

It seemed to her, all at once, that the world was full of wretchedness and death, and of separation, which might be worse than death.

"I wish I could help you, highness," said the countess. "I should like to see you happy. But happiness does not come of itself. We must fight for it."

"Fight? What chance have I to fight?" Hedwig asked scornfully.

"One thing, of course, I could do," pursued the countess. "On those days when you wish to have tea with—his royal highness, I could arrange, perhaps, to let you know if any member of the family intended going to his apartments."

It was a moment before Hedwig comprehended. Then she turned to her haughtily. "When I wish to have tea with my cousin," she said coldly, "I shall do it openly, countess."

She left the balcony abruptly, abandoning the countess to solitary fury, the greater because triumph had seemed so near. Alone, she went red and white, bit her lips, behaved according to all the time-honored traditions. And even swore—in a polite, lady-in-waiting fashion, to be sure—to get even.

Things were going very wrong for Nikky Larisch.

Perhaps, at the very first, he had been in love with the princess, not the woman. It had been rather like him to fix on the unattainable and worship it from afar. Because, for all the friendliness of their growing intimacy, Hedwig was still a star, whose light touched him, but whose warmth was not for him. He would have died fighting for her with a smile on his lips. But he had no hope of living for her, unless, of course, she should happen to need him, which was most unlikely. He had no vanity whatever, although in parade dress, with white gloves, he hoped he cut a decent figure.

So she had been his star, and as cold and remote. And then, that very morning, Hedwig had been thrown. Not badly—she was too expert for that. As a matter of fact, feeling herself going, she had flung two strong young arms around her horse's neck, and had almost succeeded in lighting on her feet. It was not at all dramatic.

But Nikky's heart had stopped beating. He had lifted her up from where she sat, half veiled and wholly ashamed, and carried her to a chair. That was all. But when it was all over, and Hedwig was only a trifle wobbly and horribly humiliated, Nikky Larisch knew the truth about himself, knew that he was in love with the granddaughter of his king, and that under no conceivable circumstances would he ever be able to tell her so. Knew, then, that happiness and he had said a long farewell, and would thereafter travel different roads.

So that night he started out to think

things over. Probably never before in his life had he deliberately done such a thing. He had never, as a fact, thought much at all. It had been his comfortable habit to let the day take care of itself. Beyond minor problems of finance—minor because his income was trifling—he had considered little. In the last border war he had distinguished himself only when it was a matter of doing, not of thinking.

But he was young, and the night was crisp and beautiful. He took a long breath, and looked up at the stars. After all, things might not be so bad. Hedwig might refuse his marriage. They were afraid that she would, or why have asked his help? When he thought of King Karl, he drew himself up, and his heels rang hard on the pavement. Karl! A hard man and a good king—that was Karl. And old. From the full manhood of his twenty-three years Nikky surveyed Karl's almost forty, and considered it age.

It was typical of Nikky to decide that he needed a hard walk. He translated most of his motions into motion. So he set off briskly, turning into the crowded part of the city.

And here it was that Nikky happened on the thing that was to take him far that night, and bring about many curious things. Not far ahead of him two men were talking. They went slowly, arm in arm. One was talking loquaciously, using his free arm, on which hung a cane, to gesticulate. The other walked with bent head.

Nikky, pausing to light a cigarette, felt behind. But the wind was tricky, and with his third match he stepped into a stone archway, lighted his cigarette, buttoned his tunic high against the chill, and emerged to a silent but violent struggle just ahead.

The two men had been attacked by three others, and as he stared, the loquacious one went down. Instantly a huge figure of a man outlined against the light from a street lamp, crouched over the prostrate form of the fallen man. Even in the imperceptible second before he started to run toward the group, Nikky saw that the silent one, unmolested, was looking on.

A moment later he was in the thick of things and fighting gloriously. His soldierly cap fell off. His fair hair bristled with excitement. He flung out arms that were both furious and strong, and with each blow the group assumed a new formation. Unluckily, a great deal of the fighting was done over the prostrate form of Peter Niburg.

But disaster, inglorious disaster, waited for Nikky. Peter Niburg, face down on the pavement, was groaning, and Nikky had felled one man and was starting on a second with the fighting appetite of twenty-three, when something happened. One moment Nikky was smiling, with a cut lip, and hair in his eyes, and the next he was dropped like an ox, by a blow from behind. Landing between his shoulder blades, it jerked his head back with a snap, and sent him reeling. A second followed, delivered by a huge fist.

Down went Nikky, and lay still. The town slept on. Street brawls were not uncommon, especially in the neighborhood of the Hungaria. Those who roused grumbled about quarrelsome students, and slept again.

Perhaps two minutes later, Nikky got up. He was another minute in locating himself. His cap lay in the gutter. Beside him, on his back, lay a sprawling and stertorous figure, with, so quick the downfall, a cane still hooked to his arm.

Nikky bent over Peter Niburg. Bending over made his head ache abominably.

"Here, man!" he said. "Get up! Rouse yourself!"

Peter Niburg made an inarticulate reference to a piece of silk of certain quality, and lay still. But his eyes

opened slowly, and he stared up at the stars. "A fine night," he said thickly. "A very fine—" Suddenly he raised himself to a sitting posture. "Turner gave me strength. 'I've been robbed,' he said. 'Robbed. I am ruined. I am dead.'"

"Tut," said Nikky, mopping his cut lip. "If you are dead, your spirit speaks with an uncommonly lusty voice! Come, get up. We present together a shameful picture of defeat."

But he raised Peter Niburg gently from the ground and, finding his knees unstable, from fright or weakness, stood him against a house wall. Peter Niburg, with rolling eyes, felt for his letter, and, the saints he praised, found it.

"Ah!" he said, and straightened up. "After all, it is not so bad as I feared. They got nothing."

He made a manful effort to walk, but tottered, reeled. Nikky caught him.

"Careful!" he said. "The colossus was doubtless the one who got us both, and we are likely to feel his weight for some time. Where do you live?"

Peter Niburg was not for saying. He would have preferred to pursue his solitary life of uncertain way. But Nikky was no half Samaritan. Toward Peter Niburg's lodging, then, they made a slow progress.

"These recent gentlemen," said Nikky, as they went along, "they are, perhaps, personal enemies?"

Peter Niburg reflected. He thought not. "But I know why they came," he said unguardedly. "Some early morning, my friend, you will hear of a man lying dead in the street. That man will be I."

"The thought has a moral," observed Nikky. "Do not trust yourself out-of-doors at night."

But he saw that Peter Niburg kept his hand over his breast pocket.

Never having dealt in mysteries, Nikky was slow at recognizing one. But, he reflected, many things were going on in the old city in these troubled days. Came to Nikky, all at once, that this man on his arm might be one of the hidden eyes of government.

"These are difficult times," he ventured, "for those who are loyal."

Peter Niburg gave him a sidelong glance. "Difficult indeed," he said briefly.

"I think," Nikky observed, "that after I see you safely home, I shall report this small matter to the police."

But here Peter Niburg turned even paler. "Not—the police!" he stammered.

"But why? You and I, my friend, will carry their insignia for some days. I have a mind to pay our debts."

Peter Niburg considered. He stopped and faced Nikky. "I do not wish the police," he said. "Perhaps I have said too little. This is a private matter. An affair of jealousy."

"I see!"

"Naturally, not a matter for publicity."

"Very well," Nikky assented. But in his mind was rising dark suspicion. He had stumbled on something. He cursed his stupidity that it meant, so far, nothing more than a mystery to him. He did not pride himself on his intelligence.

"You were not alone, I think?"

Peter Niburg suddenly remembered Herman, and stopped.

"Your friend must have escaped."

"He would escape," said Peter Niburg scornfully. "He is of the type that runs."

He lapsed into sullen silence. Soon he paused before a quiet house, one of the many which housed in cavernous depths uncounted clerks and other small fry of the city. "Good night to you," said Peter Niburg. Then, rather tardily, "And my thanks. But for you I should now—" he shrugged his shoulders.

"Good night, friend," said Nikky. "And better keep your bed tomorrow."

He had turned away and Peter Niburg entered the house.

Nikky inspected himself in the glow of a street lamp. Save for some dust, and a swollen lip, which he could not see, he was not unrepresentable. Well enough, anyhow, for the empty streets. But before he started he looked the house and the neighborhood over carefully. He might wish to return to that house.

For two hours he walked, and resumed his interrupted train of thought. At last, having almost circled the city, he came to the Cathedral. It was nearly midnight by the clock in the high tower. He stopped and consulted his watch. The fancy took him to go up the high steps, and look out over the city from the colonnade.

Once there, he stood leaning against a column, looking out. There was someone coming along the quiet streets, with a stealthy, shuffling gait that caught his attention. So, for instance, might a weary or a wounded man drag along. Exactly so, indeed, had Peter Niburg shambled into his house but two hours gone.

The footsteps paused, hesitated, commenced a painful struggle up the ascent. Nikky moved behind his column, and waited. Up and up, weary step after weary step. The shadowy figure, coming close, took a form, became a man—became Peter Niburg.

Now, indeed, Nikky roused. Beaten and sorely bruised, Peter Niburg should have been in bed. What stealthy business of the night brought him out?

Fortunately for Nikky's hiding place, the last step or two proved too much for the spy. He groaned, and sat down painfully, near the top. His head lolled forward, and he supported it on two shaking hands. Thus he sat, huddled and miserable, for five minutes or thereabouts. The chime rang out the hour.

At ten minutes past the hour, Nikky heard the engine of an automobile. No machine came in sight, but the throbbing kept on, from which he judged that a car had been stopped around the corner. Peter Niburg heard it, and rose. A moment later a man, with the springiness of youth, mounted the steps and confronted the messenger.

Nikky saw a great light. When Peter Niburg put his hand to his breast pocket, there was no longer room for doubt, nor, for that matter, time for thinking. As a matter of fact, never afterward could Nikky recall thinking at all. He moved away quietly, hidden by the shadows of the colonnade. Behind him, on the steps, the two men were talking. Absorbed in themselves and their business, they neither heard nor saw the figure that slipped through the colonnade, and dropped, a blood curdling drop, from the high end of it to the street below.

Nikky's first impulse, beside the car, was to cut a tire. By getting his opponent into a stooping position, over the damaged wheel, it would be easier

to overcome him. But a hasty search revealed that he had lost his knife in the melee. And second thought gave him a better plan. After all, to get the letter was not everything. To know its destination would be important. He had no time to think further. The messenger was coming down the steps, not stealthily, but clattering, with the ring of nails in the heels of heavy boots.

Nikky flung his long length into the tonneau, and there crouched. It was dark enough to conceal him, but Nikky's was a large body in a small place. However, the chauffeur only glanced at the car, kicked a tire with a practiced foot, and got in.

He headed for the open country. Very soon his passenger knew that he was in for a long ride possibly, a cold ride certainly. Within the city limits the car moved decorously, but when the suburbs were reached, the driver put on all his power. He drove carefully, too, as one who must make haste but cannot afford accident.

Nikky grew very uncomfortable. His long legs ached. The place between the shoulders where the countess had landed his powerful blows throbbed and beat. Also he was puzzled, and he hated being puzzled. He was unarmed, too. He disliked that most of all.

After a time he raised his head. He made out that they were going east, toward the mountains, and he cursed the luck that had left his revolver at home. Still he had no plan but to watch. Two hours' ride, at their present rate, would take them over the border and into Karnia.

With a squealing of brakes the machine drew up at the frontier. Here was a chain across the highway, with two sets of guards. Long before they reached it, a sentry stepped into the road and waved his lantern.

Nikky burrowed lower into the car, and attempted to look like a rug. In the silence, while the sentry evidently examined a passport and flashed a lantern over the chauffeur, Nikky cursed the ticking of his watch, the beating of his own heart.

Then came a clanking as the chain dropped in the road. The car bumped over it, and halted again. The same formalities, this time by Karnian sentries. Then the jerk following a hasty letting-in of the clutch, and they were off again.

For some time they climbed steadily. But Nikky, who knew the road, bided his time. Then at last, at two o'clock, came the steep ascent to the very crest of the mountain, and a falling back, gear by gear, until they climbed slowly in the lowest.

Nikky unfolded his length quietly. The gears were grinding, the driver bent low over his wheel. Very deliberately, now that he knew what he was going to do, Nikky unbuttoned his tunic and slipped it off. It was a rash thing, this plan he had in mind, rash under any circumstances, in a moving car—particularly rash here, where between the cliff and a precipice that fell far away below, was only a winding ribbon of uneven road.

Nikky, he waited his moment, and then, with one singularly efficient gesture, he flung his tunic over the chauffeur's head. He drove a car himself, did Nikky—not his own, of course; he was far too poor—and he counted on one thing—an automobile

never cuts from the spinal cord, and not from the brain. Therefore his brain may be working with a thousand frenzies, but he will show out clutch and brake foot in an emergency, and hold them out.

So it happened. The man's hands left the wheel, but he stopped his car. Not too soon. Not before it had struck the cliff, and then taken a sickening curve out toward the edge of the precipice. But stop it did, on the very edge of eternity, and the chauffeur held it there.

"Set the hand brake!" Nikky said. The lamps were near enough the edge to make him dizzy.

The chauffeur ceased struggling, and set the hand brake. His head was still covered. But having done that, he commenced a struggle more furious than forceful, for both of them were handicapped.

And now Nikky was forced to an unsoldierlike thing that he afterward tried to forget. For the driver developed unexpected strength, refused to submit, got the tunic off his head, and, seeing himself attacked by one man only, took courage and fell to. He picked up a wrench from the seat beside him, and made a furious pass at Nikky's head. Nikky ducked and, after a struggle secured the weapon. All this in the car, over the seat back.

It was then that Nikky raised the wrench and stunned his man with it. It was hateful. The very dull thud of it was sickening. And there was a bad minute or two when he thought he had killed his opponent. The man had sunk down in his seat, a sodden lump of inanimate human flesh. And Nikky, whose business, in a way, was killing, was horrified.

The chauffeur awakened, ten minutes later, to find himself securely tied with his own towing rope, and lying extremely close to the edge of death. Beside him on the ground sat a steady-eyed young man with a cut lip. The young man had lighted a cigarette, and was placing it carefully in the unjured side of his mouth.

"Just as soon as you are up to it," said Nikky, "we shall have a little talk."

The chauffeur muttered something in the peasant patois of Karnia.

"Come, come!" Nikky observed. "Speak up. No hiding behind strange tongues. But first, I have the letter. That saves your worrying about it. You can clear your mind for action." Suddenly Nikky dropped his mocking tone. He was in earnest, grim and deadly earnest.

"I have a fancy, my friend," he said, "to take that letter of yours on to its destination. But what that destination is, you are to tell me."

The man on the ground grinned sardonically. "You know better than to ask that," he said. "I will never tell you."

Nikky had thought things out fairly well, for him, in that ten minutes. In a businesslike fashion he turned the prostrate prisoner on his side, so that he faced toward the chasm. A late moon showed its depth, and the valley in which the air flowed swiftly. And having thus faced him toward the next world, Nikky, throwing away his cigarette because it hurt his lip, put a stone or two from the roadway behind his prisoner, and anchored him there. Then he sat down and waited.

"Any news?" he asked, at the end of ten minutes' unbroken silence.

His prisoner said nothing. He was thinking, doubtless. Weighing things, too—perhaps life against betrayal, a family against separation.

Nikky examined the letter again. It was addressed to a border town in Livonia. But the town lay far behind them. The address, then, was a false one. He whistled softly.

Half an hour.

"Come, come," said Nikky fiercely. "We are losing time." He looked fierce, too. His swollen lip did that. And he was nervous. It occurred to him that his prisoner, in desperation, might roll over the edge himself, which would be most uncomfortable.

But the precipice, and Nikky's fevered lip, and other things, had got in their work. The man on the ground stopped muttering in his patois, and turned to Nikky eyes full of hate.

"I will tell you," he said. "And you will free me. And after that—"

"Certainly," Nikky replied equably. "You will follow me to the ends of the earth—although that will not be necessary, because I don't intend to go there—and finish me off." Then, sternly: "Now, where does the letter go? I have a fancy for delivering it myself."

"If I tell you, what then?"

"This: If you tell me properly, and all goes well, I will return and release you. If I do not return, naturally you will not be released. And, for that you meditate a treachery, I shall get you and leave you, not here, but back a short distance, in the wood we just passed. And, because you are a brave man, and this thing may be less onerous than I think it is, I give you my word of honor that if you advise me correctly, I shall return and liberate you."

"I have only your word."

"And I yours," said Nikky. The chauffeur took a final glance around, as far as he could see, and a final shuddering look at the valley of the Ar, far below. "I will tell you," said sullenly.



A Sentry Stepped Into the Road.



In the Thick of Things and Fighting Gloriously.

gutter. Beside him, on his back, lay a sprawling and stertorous figure, with, so quick the downfall, a cane still hooked to his arm.

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Peter Niburg made an inarticulate reference to a piece of silk of certain quality, and lay still. But his eyes

The crown prince and Princess Hedwig wait in vain for the return of Nikky, whose disappearance they are unable to understand. Watch for the next installment.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

then green and finally entirely under ordinary temperature, however, genuine amethysts do not lose color.

and named. Shakespeare and the Bible will survive, after all our current literature is forgotten. Los Angeles Times. Examination Free.