Long Live the King

By MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

THROUGH ADELBERT THE COMMITTEE OF TEN LEARNS THE SECRET PASSAGE

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 Annunciata, 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. Nikky is torn between love and a sense of duty and loyalty to his king. Without Karl's support the king's death would bring the terrorists into control. The terrorists fix the carnival as the time for kidnaping the crown prince.

CHAPTER XIV—Continued.

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The concierge bent closer over the table. "Doctor Weiderman, the king's physician, is one of us," he whispered. "The king lives now only because of stimulants to the heart. His body is already dead. When the stimulants cease, he will die."

Old Adelbert covered his eyes. He had gone too far to retreat now. Driven by brooding and trouble, he had allied himself with the powers of darkness.

He sat silent while the concierge cleared the table, and put the dishes in a pan for his niece to wash. And throughout the evening he said little. At something before midnight he and his host were to set out on a grave matter, nothing less than to visit the committee of ten, and impart the old soldier's discovery. In the interval he sat waiting, and nursing his grievances to keep them warm.

Black Humbert, waiting for the hour to start and filling his tankard repeatedly, grew loquacious. He hinted of past matters in which he had proved his value to the cause. Old Adelbert gathered that, if he had not actually murdered the late crown prince and his wife, he had been closely concerned in it. His thin, old flesh crept with anxiety. It was a bad business, and he could not withdraw.

"We should have had the child, too," boasted the concierge, "and saved much bother. But he had been, unknown to us, sent to the country. A matter of milk, I believe."

"But you say you do not war on children!"

"Bah! A babe of a few months. Furthermore," said the concierge, "I have a nose for the police. I scent a spy, as a dog scents a bone. Who, think you, discovered Haeckel?"

"Haeckel!" Old Adelbert sat upright in his chair.

"Aye, Haeckel, Haeckel the jovial, the archconspirator. Who but I? I suspected him. He was too fierce. He had no caution. He was what a peaceful citizen may fancy a revolutionist to be. I watched him. He was not brave. He was reckless because he had nothing to fear. And at last I caught him."

Old Adelbert was sitting forward on the edge of his chair, his jaw dropped.

He Piloted the Veteran Among the Graves.

"And what then?" he gasped. "He was but a boy. Perhaps you misjudged him. Boys are reckless."

"I caught him," said the concierge. "I have said it. He knew much. He had names, places, even dates. For that matter, he confessed."

"Then he is dead?" quavered old Adelbert.

The concierge shrugged his shoulders. "Of course," he said briefly. "For a time he was kept here, in an upper room. He could have saved himself, if he would. We could have used him. But he turned sulky, refused speech, did not eat. When he was taken away," he added with unction, "he was so weak that he could not walk." He rose and consulted a great silver watch. "We can go now," he said. "The committee likes promptness."

They left together, the one striding out with long steps that were surprisingly light for his size, the other, hanging back a trifle, as one who walks because he must. Old Adelbert, who had loved his king better than his country, was a lagging "patriot" that night. His breath came short and labored. His throat was dry. As they passed the opera, however, he threw his head up. The performance was over, but the great house was still lighted, and in the foyer, strutting about, was his successor. Old Adelbert quickened his steps.

At the edge of the place, near the statue of the queen, they took a car, and so reached the borders of the city. After that they walked far. The scent of the earth, fresh turned by the plough, was in their nostrils. Cattle, turned out after the long winter, grazed or lay in the fields. Through the ooze of the road the two plodded; old Adelbert struggling through with difficulty, the concierge exhorting him impatiently to haste.

At last the leader paused, and surveyed his surroundings: "Here I must cover your eyes, comrade," he said. "It is a formality all must comply with."

Old Adelbert drew back. "I do not like your rule. I am not as other men. I must see where I go."

"I shall lead you carefully. And, if you fear, I can carry you." He chuckled at the thought. But old Adelbert knew well that he could do it, knew that he was as a child to those mighty arms. He submitted to the bandage, however, with an ill grace that caused the concierge to smile.

"It hurts your dignity, eh, old rooster!" he said jovially. "Others, of greater dignity, have felt the same. But all submit in the end."

He piloted the veteran among the graves with the ease of familiarity. Only once he spoke. "Know you where you are?"

"In a field," said Adelbert, "recently ploughed."

"Aye, in a field, right enough. But one which sows corruption, and raises nothing, until perhaps great St. Gabriel calls in his crop."

Then, realizing the meaning of the mounds over which he trod, old Adelbert crossed himself.

"Only a handful know of this meeting place," boasted the concierge. "I, and a few others. Only we may meet with the committee face to face."

"You must have great influence," observed old Adelbert timidly.

"I control the guilds. He who today can sway labor to his will is powerful; very powerful, comrade. Labor is the great beast which tires of carrying burdens, and is but now learning its strength."

"Aye," said old Adelbert. "Had I been wise, I would have joined a guild. Then I might have kept my place at the opera. As it is, I stood alone, and they put me out."

"You do not stand alone now. Stand by us, and we will support you. The republic will not forget its friends."

Thus heartened, old Adelbert brightened up somewhat. Why should he, an old soldier, sweat at the thought of blood? Great changes required heroic measures. It was because he was old that he feared change. He stumped through the passageway without urging, and stood erect and with shoulders squared while the bandage was removed.

He was rather longer than Olga Loschek had been in comprehending his surroundings. His old eyes at first saw little but the table and its candles in their gruesome holders. But when he saw the committee his heart failed. Here, embodied before him, was everything he had loathed during all his upright and loyal years—anarchy, murder, treason. His face worked. The cords in his neck stood out like strings drawn to the breaking point.

The concierge was speaking. For all his boasting, he was ill at ease. His voice had lost its bravado, and had taken on a fawning note.

"This is the man of whom word was sent to the committee," he said. "I ventured to ask that he be allowed to come here, because he brings information of value."

"Step forward, comrade," said the leader. "What is your name and occupation?"

"Adelbert, excellency. As to occupation, for years I was connected with the opera. Twenty years, excellency. Then I grew old, and another—" His voice broke.

"What is the information that brings you here?"

Suddenly old Adelbert wept, terrible tears that forced their way from his faded eyes, and ran down his cheeks. "I cannot, excellencies!" he cried. "I find I cannot."

He collapsed into the chair, and throwing his arms across the table bowed his head on them. His shoulders heaved under his old uniform. The committee stirred, and the concierge caught him brutally by the wrist.

"Up with you!" he said, from clenched teeth. "What stupidity is this? Would you play with death?"

But old Adelbert was beyond fear. He shook his head. "I cannot," he muttered, his face hidden.

Then the concierge stood erect and folded his arms across his chest. "He

"It Is There," He Said Thickly.

is terrified, that is all," he said. "If the committee wishes, I can tell them of this matter. Later, he can be interrogated."

The leader nodded.

"By chance," said the concierge, "this—this brave veteran"—he glanced contemptuously at the huddled figure in the chair—"has come across an old passage, the one which rumor has said lay under the city wall, and for which we have at different times instituted search."

He paused, to give his words weight. That they were of supreme interest could be told by the craning forward of the committee.

"The entrance is concealed at the base of the old Gate of the Moon. Our friend here followed it, and reports it in good condition. For a mile or thereabouts it follows the line of the destroyed wall. Then it turns and goes to the palace itself."

"Into the palace?"

"By a flight of stairs, inside the wall, to a door in the roof. This door, which was locked, he opened, having carried keys with him. The door he describes as in the tower. As it was night, he could not see clearly, but the roof at that point is flat."

"Stand up, Adelbert," said the leader sharply. "This that our comrade tells is true?"

"It is true, excellency."

"Shown a diagram of the palace, could you locate this door?"

Old Adelbert stared around him hopelessly. It was done now. Nothing that he could say or refuse to say would change that. He nodded.

When, soon after, a chart of the palace was placed on the table, he indicated the location of the door with a trembling forefinger. "It is there," he said thickly. "And may God forgive me for the thing I have done!"

CHAPTER XV.

King Karl.

"They love us dearly!" said King Karl.

The chancellor, who sat beside him in the royal carriage, shrugged his shoulders. "They have had little reason to love, in the past, majesty," he said briefly.

Karl laughed, and watched the crowd. He and the chancellor rode alone, Karl's entourage, a very modest one, following in another carriage. There was no military escort, no pomp. It had been felt unwise. Karl, paying ostensibly a visit of sympathy, had come unofficially.

The chancellor was not so calm as he appeared. He had lined the route from the station to the palace with his men; had prepared for every contingency so far as he could without calling out the guard. As the carriage, drawn by its four chestnut horses, moved slowly along the streets, his eyes under their overhanging thatch were watching ahead, searching the crowd for symptoms of unrest.

Anger he saw in plenty, and suspicion. Scowling faces and frowning brows. But as yet there was no disorder. He sat with folded arms, magnificent in his uniform beside Karl, who wore civilian dress and looked less royal than perhaps he felt.

And Karl, too, watched the crowd, feeling its temper and feigning an indifference he did not feel. Olga Loschek had been right. He did not want trouble. More than that, he was of an age now to crave popularity. Many of the measures which had made him beloved in his own land had no higher purpose than this, the smiles of the crowd. So he watched and talked of indifferent things.

"It is ten years since I have been here," he observed, "but there are few changes."

"We have built no great buildings," said Mettlich bluntly. "Wars have left us no money, majesty, for building!"

That being a closed road, so to speak, Karl tried another. "The crown prince must be quite a lad," he experimented. "He was a babe in arms, then, but frail, I thought."

"He is sturdy now." The chancellor relapsed into watchfulness.

"Before I see the Princess Hedwig," Karl made another attempt, "it might be well to tell me how she feels about things. I would like to feel that the prospect is at least not disagreeable to her."

The chancellor was not listening. There was trouble ahead. It had come, then, after all. He muttered something behind his gray mustache. The horses stooped, as the crowd suddenly closed in front of them.

"Drive on!" he said angrily, and the coachman touched his whip to the horses. But they only reared, to be grasped at the bridles by hostile hands ahead.

Karl half rose from his seat.

"Sit still, majesty," said the chancellor. "It is the students. They will talk, that is all."

But it came perilously near to being a riot. Led by some students, pushed by others, the crowd surrounded the two carriages, first muttering, then yelling. A stone was hurled, and struck one of the horses. Another dented the body of the carriage itself. A man with a handkerchief tied over the lower half of his face mounted the shoulders of two companions, and harangued the crowd. They wanted no friendship with Karnia. Were they to lose their national existence? He exhorted them madly through the handkerchief. A babel of noise, of swinging back and forth, of mounted police pushing through to surround the carriage, of cries and the dominating voices of the student demagogues. Then at last a semblance of order, low muttering, an escort of police with drawn revolvers around the carriage, and it moved ahead.

Through it all the chancellor had sat with folded arms. Only his livid face told of his fury. Karl, too, had sat impassive, picking at his small mustache. But, as the carriage moved on, he said: "A few moments ago I observed that there had been few changes. But there has been, I perceive, after all, a great change."

"One cannot judge the many by the few, majesty."

But Karl only raised his eyebrows.

In his rooms, removing the dust of his journey, broken by the automobile trip across the mountains where the two railroads would some day meet, Karl reflected on the situation. A dual monarchy, one portion of it restless and revolutionary, was less desirable than the present peace and prosperity of Karnia. And unrest was contagious. He might find himself in a difficult position.

He glanced about his rooms. In one of them Prince Hubert had met his death. It was well enough for Mettlich to say the few could not speak for the many. It took but one man to do a murder, Karl reflected grimly.

But when he arrived for tea in the archduchess' white drawing room he was urbane and smiling. He kissed the hand of the archduchess and bent over Hedwig's with a flash of white teeth.

Then he saw Olga Loschek, and his smile stiffened. The countess came forward, curtsied, and as he extended his hand to her, touched it lightly with her lips. They were quite cold. For just an instant their eyes met.

It was, on the surface, an amiable and quiet tea party. Hedwig had taken up her position by a window, and was conspicuously silent. Behind her were the soft ring of silver against china, the countess' gay tones, Karl's suave ones, assuming gravity, as he inquired as to his majesty's health; the Archduchess Annunciata pretending a solicitude she did not feel. And all forced, all artificial.

"Grandmother," Hedwig whispered from her window to the austere old bronze figure in the place, "was it like this with you, at first? Did you shiver when he touched your hand? And doesn't it matter, after a year?"

"Very feeble," said the archduchess' voice, behind her, "but so brave—a lesson to us all."

"He has had a long and conspicuous career," Karl observed. "It is sad, but we must all come to it. I hope he will be able to see me."

"Hedwig!" said her mother, sharply, "your tea is getting cold."

Hedwig turned toward the room. Listlessness gave her an added dignity, a new charm. Karl's eyes flamed as he watched her. Even her coldness appealed to him. He had a feeling that the coldness was only a young girl's armor, that under it was a deeply passionate woman. The thought of seeing her come to deep, vibrant life in his arms thrilled him.

When he carried her tea to her, he bent over her. "Please!" he said. "Try to like me, I—"

"I'm sorry," Hedwig said quickly. "Mother has forgotten the lemon."

Karl smiled and, shrugging his shoulders, fetched the lemon. "Right, now?" he inquired. "And aren't we going to have a talk together?"

"If you wish it, I dare say we shall."

"Majesty," said Hilda, frowning into her teacup. "I see a marriage for you." She ignored her mother's scowl, and tilted her cup to examine it.

"A marriage!" Karl joined her, and peered with mock anxiety at the tea grounds. "Strange that my fate should be confined in so small a compass! A happy marriage? Which am I?"

"The long yellow leaf. Yes, it looks happy. But you may be rather shocked when I tell you."

"Shocked?"

"I think," said Hilda, grinning, "that you are going to marry me."

"Delightful!"

"And we are going to have—"

"Hilda!" cried the archduchess fretfully, "Do stop that nonsense and let us talk. I was trying to recall, this morning," she said to Karl, "when you last visited us." She knew it quite well, but she preferred having Karl think she had forgotten. "It was, I believe, just before Hubert—"

"Yes," said Karl gravely, "just before."

"Otto was a baby then."

"A very small child. I remember that I was afraid to handle him."

"He is a curious boy, old beyond his years. Rather a little prig, I think. He has an English governess, and she has made him quite a little woman."

Karl laughed, but Hedwig flushed. "He is not that sort at all," she declared stoutly. "He is lonely and—and rather pathetic. The truth is that no one really cares for him, except—"

"Except Captain Larisch!" said the archduchess smoothly. "You and he, Hedwig, have done your best by him, surely."

The bit of byplay was not lost on Karl—the sudden stiffening of Hedwig's back, Olga's narrowed eyes. Olga had been right, then. Trust her for knowing facts when they were disagreeable. His eyes became set and watchful, hard, too, had any noticed. There were ways to deal with such a situation, of course. They were giving him this girl to secure their own safety, and she knew it. Had he not been so mad about her he might have pitied her, but he felt no pity, only a deep and resentful determination to get rid of Nikky, and then to warm her by his own fire. He might have to break her first. After that manner had many queens of Karnia come to the throne. He smiled behind his small mustache.

When tea was almost over, the crown prince was announced. He came in, rather nervously, with his hands thrust in his trousers pockets.

A Babel of Noise, of Swinging Back and Forth.

He was very shiny with soap and water and his hair was still damp from parting. In his tailless black jacket, his long gray trousers, and his round Eton collar, he looked like a very anxious little schoolboy, and not royal at all.

Greetings over, and having requested that his tea be half milk, with four lumps of sugar, he carried his cup over beside Hedwig, and sat down on a chair. Followed a short silence, with the archduchess busy with the tea things, Olga Loschek watching Karl, and Karl intently surveying the crown prince. Ferdinand William Otto, who disliked a silence, broke it first.

"I've just taken off my winter flannels," he observed. "I feel very smooth and nice underneath."

Hilda giggled, but Hedwig reached over and stroked his arm. "Of course you do," she said gently.

"Nikky," continued Prince William Otto, stirring his tea, "does not wear any flannels. Miss Braithwaite thinks he is very careless."

King Karl's eyes gleamed with amusement. He saw the infuriated face of the archduchess, and bent toward the crown prince with earnestness.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "since you have mentioned the subject, I do not wear any either. Your 'Nikky' and I seem most surprisingly to have the same tastes—about various things."

"Do you like dogs?" inquired the crown prince, much interested.

"Dogs! Why, yes. I have quite a number of dogs."

"I should think it would be nicer to have just one dog, and be very fond of it. But I suppose they would eat a great deal. Do you believe in love at first sight?"

"Otto!" said the archduchess, extremely shocked.

He turned to her apologetically. "I was only trying to find out how many things he and Nikky agreed about," he explained. "Nikky believes in love at first sight. He says it is the only real kind of love, because love isn't a thing you think out. You only feel it."

The archduchess met Karl's eyes. "You see!" she said.

"But it is sound doctrine," Karl observed, bending forward and with a slanting glance at Hedwig. "I quite agree with him again. And this friend of yours, he thinks love is the only thing in the world, I dare say?"

"Well, he thinks a great deal of it. But he says that love of country comes first, before anything else."

The archduchess glanced at Hedwig furiously. The girl had closed her eyes, and was sitting detached and pale. She would have liked to box her ears. Karl was no fool, and there was talk enough. He would hear it, of course.

"Tell us about your pilgrimage, Otto," she suggested.

"Well, I went," said the crown prince reflectively. "We walked a long time, and it was very warm. I have quite a large blister, and the archbishop had to take his shoes off and walk in his stockings, because his feet hurt. No one saw. It was on a country lane. But I'm afraid it didn't do very much good." He drew a long breath.

"No?" Karl inquired.

Suddenly the boy's chin quivered. He was terribly afraid he was going to cry, and took a large sip of tea, which cleared his voice.

"My grandfather is not any better," he said. "Perhaps some one else should have gone. I am not very good," he explained to Karl. "It ought to be a very good person. He is very sick."

"Perhaps," suggested Karl mockingly, with a glance at Hedwig, "they should have sent this 'Nikky' of yours."

Annunciata stirred restlessly. She considered this talk of Nikky in execrable taste.

"He is not particularly good."

"Oh, so he is not particularly good?"

"Well, he thinks he isn't. He says he doesn't find it easy to love his country more than anything in the world, for one thing. And he smokes a great many cigarettes."

"Another taste in common!" jeered Karl, in his smooth, carefully ironic tones.

Annunciata was in the last stages of irritation. There was no mistaking the sneer in Karl's voice. His smile was forced. She guessed that he had heard of Nikky Larisch before, that, indeed, he knew probably more than she did. Just what, she wondered, was there to know? A great deal, if one could judge by Hedwig's face.

"I hope you are working hard at your lessons, Otto," she said, in the severe tone which Otto had learned that most people use when they refer to lessons.

"I'm afraid I'm not doing very well, Tante. But I've learned the 'Gettysburg address.' Shall I say it?"

"Heavens, no!" she protested. She had not the faintest idea what the "Gettysburg address" was. She suspected Mr. Gladstone.

The countess had relapsed into silence. A little back from the family circle, she had watched the whole scene stonily, and knowing Karl as only a woman who loves sincerely and long can know a man, she knew the inner workings of his mind. She saw anger in the very turn of his head and set of his jaw. But she saw more, jealousy, and was herself half mad with it.

She knew him well. She had herself, for years, held him by holding herself dear, by the very difficulty of attaining her. And now this indifferent, white-faced girl, who might be his, indeed, for the taking, but who would offer or promise no love, was rousing him to the instinct of possession by her very indifference. He had told her the truth, that night in the mountain inn. It was Hedwig he wanted, Hedwig herself, her heart, all of her. And, if she knew Karl, he would move heaven and earth to get the thing he wanted.

She surveyed the group. How little they knew what was in store for them! She, Olga Loschek, by the lifting of a finger, could turn their smug superiority into tears and despair, could ruin them and send them flying for shelter to the very ends of the earth.

But when she looked at the little crown prince, legs dangling, eating his thin bread and butter as only a hungry small boy can eat, she shivered. By what means must she do all this! By what unspeakable means!

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Karl saw the king that evening, a short visit marked by extreme formality, and, on the king's part, by the keen and frank scrutiny of one who is near the end and fears nothing but the final moment. Karl found the meeting depressing and the king's eyes disconcerting.

Countess Loschek sees a chance for revenge. The next installment gives the exciting details.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)