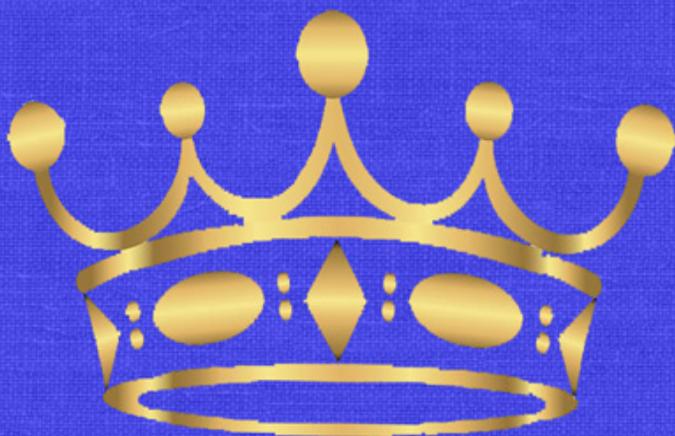


“LONG LIVE THE KING!”



Mary Roberts Rinehart

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Title: "Long Live the King!"

Date of first publication: 1912

Author: Mary Roberts Rinehart (1876-1958)

Date first posted: Sep. 28, 2020

Date last updated: Sep. 28, 2020

Faded Page eBook #20200981

This eBook was produced by: Mardi Desjardins, Jen Haines & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpcanada.net>



“I HAVE HEARD IT SAID MANY TIMES.
WHEN ST. STEFAN’S TOLLS LIKE THAT,
THE KING IS DEAD!”

“LONG LIVE THE KING!”

BY MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

AUTHOR OF “THE MAN IN LOWER TEN,” “THE AMAZING
ADVENTURES OF LETITIA CARBERRY,” ETC.

WITH TWO DRAWINGS (SEE FRONTISPIECE) BY ARTHUR I. KELLER

I

THE crown prince sat in the royal box and swung his legs. This was hardly princely, but the royal legs did not quite reach the floor from the high crimson velvet seat of his chair.

Prince Ferdinand Wilhelm Franz Otto was bored. His royal robes, consisting of a pair of blue serge trousers, a short Eton jacket, and a stiff, rolling collar of white linen, irked him.

He had been brought to the opera-house under a misapprehension. His aunt, the Princess Annunciata, had strongly advocated “The Flying Dutchman,” and his English governess, Miss Simpkins, had read him some rather inspiring literature about it. So here he was, and the Flying Dutchman was not ghostly at all, nor did it fly. It was, from the royal box, only too plainly a ship which had length and height, without thickness. And instead of flying, after dreary eons of singing, it was moved off on creaky rollers by men whose shadows were thrown grotesquely on the sea backing.

The orchestra, assisted by a bass solo and intermittent thunder in the wings, was making a deafening din. One of the shadows on the sea backing took out its handkerchief and wiped its nose.

Prince Ferdinand Wilhelm looked across at the other royal box, and caught his cousin Hedwig’s eye. She also had seen the handkerchief; she took out her own scrap of linen, and mimicked the shadow. Then—the Princess Annunciata being occupied with the storm—she winked across at Prince Ferdinand Wilhelm.

In the opposite box were his three cousins, the Duchesses Hilda, Maria, and Hedwig. Personally he liked Hedwig best. She was the youngest and prettiest. Although she had been introduced to the court at the Christmas eve ball, and had been duly presented by her grandfather, the king, with the

usual string of pearls and her own carriage with the spokes of the wheels gilded half-way—only the king and Prince Ferdinand Wilhelm had all gold wheels—she still ran off now and then to have tea with Ferdinand and Miss Simpkins in the schoolroom at the palace, and she could eat a great deal of bread and butter.

Prince Ferdinand Wilhelm winked back at the Duchess Hedwig. And just then—

“Listen!” said the Princess Annunciata, leaning forward. “The ‘Spinning Song’—is it not exquisite?”

“They are only pretending to spin,” remarked Prince Ferdinand Wilhelm.

Nevertheless, he listened obediently. He rather liked it. They had not fooled him at all. They were not really spinning—any one could see that—but they were sticking very closely to their business of each outsinging the other, and collectively of drowning out the orchestra.

The spinning chorus was followed by long and tiresome solos. The crown prince yawned again. Catching Hedwig’s eye, he ran his fingers up through his thick yellow hair and grinned.

Hedwig blushed. She had confided to him once, while they were walking in the garden at the summer palace, that she was madly in love with a young lieutenant of the palace guard. Ferdinand had been much interested. He had asked to have the lieutenant ride with him at the court riding-school, and his grim old grandfather had granted the request.

Ferdinand liked the young officer. He assured Hedwig, the next time she came to tea, that when he was king he would see that she married the lieutenant. But Hedwig was much distressed.

“I don’t want him that way,” she said. “He—he doesn’t care about me. You should see the way he stares at Hilda!”

“Pish!” said Ferdinand over his cup. “Hilda is not as pretty as you are. We talk about you frequently.”

“Good gracious!” exclaimed the Princess Hedwig, coloring. “And what do you say?”

Miss Simpkins’s back being turned, Ferdinand Wilhelm took another lump of sugar.

“Say? Oh, not much, you know. He asks how you are, and I tell him you are well, and that you ate thirteen pieces of bread at tea, or whatever it may

have been. The day Miss Simpkins had the toothache, and you and I ate the fruit-cake her sister had sent from England, he was very anxious. He said we both deserved to be ill.”

The Duchess Hedwig had been blushing uncomfortably, but now she paled.

“He dared to say that?” she stormed, and picked up her muff and went out.

Only—and this was curious—by the next day she had forgiven the lieutenant, and was angry at Ferdinand Wilhelm. Women are very strange.

So now Ferdinand Wilhelm ran his fingers through his light hair, which was a favorite gesture of the lieutenant’s, and Hedwig blushed. After that, she refused to look across at him, but sat staring fixedly at the stage, where Frau Engel, in a short skirt, a black velvet bodice, and a white apron with two yellow braids over her shoulders, was listening, with all the coyness of forty years and six children at home, to the love-making of a man in a false black beard.

The Princess Annunciata, sitting well back, was nodding. Just outside, on the red velvet sofa, General Mettlich, on guard, was sound asleep. His martial bosom, with its gold braid, was rising and falling peacefully. Beside him lay the prince’s crown, a small black derby hat.

The Duchess Maria looked across, and smiled and nodded at Ferdinand Wilhelm. Then she went back to the music; she held the score in her hand and followed it note by note.

It was very wearisome! If one could only wander around the corridor, or buy a sandwich from the stand at the foot of the great staircase—or, better still, if one could only get to the street, alone, and purchase one of the fig women that Miss Simpkins so despised! And, after all, why not? His aunt and General Mettlich were asleep; Miss Simpkins, *Gott sei dank*, was at home with a headache. Why not?

With the trepidation of a canary who finds his cage-door open, and, hopping to the threshold, surveys the world before venturing to explore it, Prince Ferdinand Wilhelm rose to his feet, tiptoed past the Princess Annunciata, who did not move, and looked around him from the doorway.

In the royal dressing-room behind the box, a lady in waiting was sitting and crocheting. A maid was spreading the Princess Annunciata’s carriage wrap before the fire. The three duchesses had shed their carriage boots just inside the door. They were in a row, curiously of a size.

Prince Ferdinand Wilhelm picked up his hat and concealed it by his side. Then nonchalantly, as if to stretch his legs by walking ten feet up the corridor and back, he passed the dressing-room door. Another moment, and he was out of sight around a bend of the passageway, and before him lay liberty.

Not quite! At the top of the private staircase reserved for the royal family, a sentry commonly stood. He had moved a few feet from his post, however, and was watching the stage through the half-open door of a private loge. His gun, with its fixed bayonet, leaned against the stair rail.

Prince Ferdinand Wilhelm passed behind him with outward calmness. At the top of the public staircase, however, he hesitated. Here, everywhere, were brass-buttoned officials of the opera-house. A *garde-robe* woman stared at him curiously. There was a noise from the house, too—a sound of clapping hands and “bravos.”

The little prince looked at the woman with appeal in his eyes. Then, with his heart thumping, he ran past her, down the white marble staircase, to where the great doors promised liberty.

Olga, the *garde-robe* woman, came out from behind her counter, and stood looking down the marble staircase after the small flying figure.

“*Lieber Gott!*” she said, wondering. “How much that child resembled his royal highness!”



WITH A CRY OF THANKFULNESS,
GENERAL METTLICH KNELT AND KISSED THE SMALL, NOT
OVER CLEAN HAND

The old soldier who rented opera-glasses at the second landing, and who had left a leg in Bosnia, leaned over the railing.

“Look at that!” he exclaimed. “He will break a leg, the young rascal! Once I could have—but there, he is safe! The good God watches over fools and children.”

“It looked like the *prinzchen*,” said the woman. “I have seen him often—he has the same bright hair.”

But the opera-glass man was not listening. He had drawn a long sausage from one pocket and a roll from the other, and now, retiring to a far window, he stood placidly eating—a bite of sausage, a bite of bread. His mind was in Bosnia, with his leg.

And because old Adelbert’s mind was in Bosnia, and since one hears with the mind, and not with the ear, he did not hear the sharp question of the sentry who ran down the stairs and paused for a second at the *garde-robe*. Well for Olga, too, that he did not hear her reply.

“He has not passed here,” she said, with wide and honest eyes, but with an ear toward old Adelbert. “An old gentleman came a moment ago, and got a sandwich, which he had left in his overcoat. Perhaps that is whom you are seeking?”

The sentry cursed, and ran down the staircase, the nails in his shoes striking sharply on the marble.

At the window, old Adelbert cut off another slice of sausage with his pocket-knife and sauntered back to his table of opera-glasses at the angle of the balustrade. The hurrying figure of the sentry below caught his eye.

“Another fool!” he grumbled, looking down. “One would think new legs grew in place of old ones, like the claws of sea-creatures! *Himmel!*”

But Frau Olga leaned over her checks, with her lips curved up in a smile.

“The little one!” she thought. “And such courage! He will make a great king. Let him have his prank like other children, and—God bless him and keep him!”

Sheltered behind the rows of coats from Adelbert’s spying old eyes, she crossed herself.

II

THE crown prince was just a trifle dazzled by the brilliance of his success. He paused for one breathless moment under the *porte-cochère* of the opera-house; then he took a long breath and turned to the left. For he knew that at the right, just around the corner, were the royal carriages, with his own drawn up before the door, and Beppo and Hans erect on the box, their haughty noses red in the wind, for the early spring air was biting.

So he turned to the left, and was at once swallowed up in the street crowd. It seemed very strange to him. Not that he was unaccustomed to crowds. Had he not, that very Christmas, gone shopping in the Stadtplatz, accompanied only by General Mettlich and Miss Simpkins, and bought his grandfather, the king, a burnt-wood box which might hold either neckties or gloves, and his cousins silver photograph-frames?

But this was different, and for a rather peculiar reason. Prince Ferdinand Wilhelm had never seen the back of a crowd! The public was always lined up, facing him, smiling and bowing and God-blessing him. Small wonder he thought of most of his future subjects as being much like the ship in the opera, meant only to be viewed from the front.

Also, it was surprising to see how stiff and straight their backs were. Prince Ferdinand Wilhelm had never known that backs could be so rigid. Those with which he was familiar had a way of drooping forward from the middle of the spine up. It was most interesting!

The next hour was full of remarkable things. For one, he dodged behind a streetcar and was almost run over by a taxicab. The policeman on the corner came out, and, taking Ferdinand Wilhelm by the shoulder, gave him a talking to and a shaking. Ferdinand Wilhelm was furious, but policy kept him silent; which proves conclusively that the crown prince had not only initiative—witness his flight—but self-control and diplomacy. Lucky country, to have in prospect such a king!

But even royalty has its weaknesses. At the next corner Ferdinand Wilhelm stopped and invested his small change in the forbidden fig lady, with arms and legs of cloves. He had wanted one of these ever since he could remember, but Miss Simpkins had sternly refused to authorize the purchase. In fact, she had had one of the raisins placed under a microscope,

and had shown his royal highness a number of interesting and highly active creatures who made their homes therein.

His royal highness recalled all this with great distinctness, and, immediately dismissing it from his mind, ate the legs and arms of the fig woman with enjoyment. Which—not the eating of legs and arms, of course, but to be able to dismiss what is unpleasant—is another highly desirable royal trait.

His movements, although agreeably indeterminate, had by now a definite object. This was the park, and a certain portion of the park at that.

It was not the long *allée* between rows of trees trimmed to resemble walls of green in summer, and curiously distorted skeletons in winter; not the coffee-houses, where young officers in uniform sat under the trees reading the papers, and rising to bow with great clanking and much ceremony as a gold-wheeled carriage or a pretty girl went by.

Prince Ferdinand Wilhelm had the fulfilment of a great desire in his small, active mind. This was nothing less than a ride on the American scenic railroad, which had secured a concession in a far corner of the park. Hedwig's lieutenant had described it to him—how one was taken in a small car to a dizzy height, and then turned loose on a track which dropped giddily and rose again, which hurled one through sheet-iron tunnels of incredible blackness, thrust one out over a gorge, whirled one in mad curves around corners of precipitous heights, and finally landed one, panting, breathless, shocked, and reeling, but safe, at the very platform where one had purchased his ticket three eternities, which were only minutes, before.

Prince Ferdinand Wilhelm had put this proposition, like the raisins, to Miss Simpkins. Miss Simpkins replied with the sad story of an English child who had clutched at its cap during a crucial moment on a similar track at the Crystal Palace.

“When they picked him up,” she finished, “every bone in his body was broken!”

“*Every bone?*” queried the prince.

“Every bone,” said Miss Simpkins solemnly.

“The little ones in his ears, and *all?*”

“Every one,” said Miss Simpkins, refusing to weaken.

The prince pondered.

“He must have felt like jelly,” he remarked, and Miss Simpkins had dropped the subject.

So now, with freedom and his week’s allowance, except the outlay for the fig woman, in his pocket, Ferdinand Wilhelm started for the Land of Desire. The *allée* was almost deserted. It was the sacred hour of coffee. The terraces were empty, but from the coffee-houses along the drive there came a cheerful rattle of cups, a hum of conversation.

As the early spring twilight fell, the gas-lamps along the *allée*, always burning, made a twin row of pale stars ahead. At the end, even as the wanderer gazed, he saw myriads of tiny red, white, and blue lights, rising high in the air, outlining the crags and peaks of the sheet-iron mountain which was his destination. The Land of Desire was very near!

There came to his ears, too, the occasional rumble that told of some palpitating soul being at that moment hurled and twisted and joyously thrilled, as *per* the lieutenant’s description.

Now it is a strange thing, but true, that one does not reach the Land of Desire alone; because the half of pleasure is the sharing of it with some one else, and the Land of Desire, alone, is not the Land of Desire at all. Quite suddenly, Prince Ferdinand Wilhelm Franz Otto discovered that he was lonely.

He sat down on the curb under a gas-lamp and ate the fig woman’s head, taking out the cloves, because he did not like cloves. At that moment there was a soft whirring off to one side of him, and a yellow bird, rising and falling erratically on the breeze, careened suddenly and fell at his feet.

Ferdinand Wilhelm leaned over and picked it up. It was a small toy aeroplane, with yellow silk planes, guy-ropes of waxed thread, and a wooden rudder, its motive power vested in a tightly twisted rubber. One of the wings was bent. Ferdinand Wilhelm straightened it, and looked around for the owner.

A small boy was standing under the next gas-lamp.

“Gee!” he said in English. “Did you see it go that time?”

Ferdinand Wilhelm eyed the stranger. He was about his own age, and was curiously dressed. He wore a short pair of corduroy trousers, much bloomed at the knee, a pair of yellow Russia-leather shoes that reached well to his calves, and, over all, a shaggy white sweater, rolling almost to his chin. On the very back of his head he had the smallest cap that Prince Ferdinand Wilhelm had ever seen.

Now this was exactly the way in which Ferdinand Wilhelm had always wished to dress. He was suddenly conscious of the long trousers on his own small legs, of the ignominy of his tailless Eton jacket and stiff, rolling collar, of the crowning disgrace of his derby hat. But—the lonely feeling had gone from him.

“This is the best time for flying,” he said, in his perfect English. “All the exhibition flights are at sundown.”

The boy walked slowly over and stood looking down at him.

“You ought to see it fly from the top of Pike’s Peak!” he remarked. He had caught sight of the despised derby, and his eyes widened, but with instinctive good-breeding he ignored it. “That’s Pike’s Peak up there.”

He indicated the very top of the Land of Desire. The prince stared up.

“How does one get up?” he queried.

“Ladders. My father’s the manager. He lets me up—sometimes.”

Prince Ferdinand Wilhelm stared with new awe at the boy. He found the fact much more remarkable than if the stranger had stated that his father was the King of England. Kings were, as you may say, directly in Ferdinand Wilhelm’s line, but scenic railroads—

“I had thought of taking a journey on it,” he said, after a second’s reflection. “Do you think your father will sell me a ticket?”

“Billy Grimm will. I’ll go with you.”

The prince rose with alacrity. Then he stopped. He must, of course, ask the strange boy to be his guest. But two tickets! Perhaps his allowance—

“I must see first how much it costs,” he said with dignity.

The other boy laughed.

“Oh, gee! You come with me. It won’t cost anything,” he said, and led the way toward the towering lights.

For Bobby Treat to bring a small boy to ride with him was an every-day affair. Billy Grimm, at the ticket-window, hardly glanced at the boy who stood, trembling with anticipation, in the shadow of the booth.

“Remember, Bob,” he said, passing out the two tickets to fairy-land as if they were mere bits of paper, “I haven’t pulled your ears for luck yet. Just wait until closing-time!”

“It’s my birthday,” explained Bobby, as they climbed the steps to the waiting car. “In America they pull your ears on your birthday. What do they do to *you*?”

Now Ferdinand Wilhelm had had a birthday lately. He had a vivid recollection of early mass in the palace chapel before dawn, with the prelates of the church praying for his long life and health and wisdom; of being taken at eleven o’clock to see his grandfather, the king, and of suffering a grilling examination in army tactics at the hands of that grim old man of blood; and of a tiring reception that afternoon, when the court had brought its respects and good wishes, as well as the admirals of the fleet and the generals of the army, and the burgomaster had read him a long address, while he stood until his legs ached. Also, he remembered that he had had preserved pineapple at tea that day, by way of special jollification. Nobody had pulled his ears.

“They—oh, they don’t do very much,” he said evasively.

“Doesn’t your mother let you order what you want for dinner, or give you presents?” Bobby asked.

“My mother’s dead,” said Ferdinand Wilhelm.

He did not have a lump in his throat when he said it. His mother had died years before, as had his father—both felled by the dagger of an assassin. To Ferdinand Wilhelm they were two pictures that hung on his bedroom wall, and of course there was his father’s sword. He rather fancied the sword. Once or twice, in his rare moments alone, he had buckled it on. It was much too long, of course, unless he stood on a hassock.

The car came just then, and they climbed in. Perhaps, as they moved off, Prince Ferdinand Wilhelm had a qualm, occasioned by the remembrance of the English child who had met an untimely end; but if he did, he pluckily hid it.

“Put your lid on the floor of the car,” said Bobby Treat, depositing his own atom there. “Father says, if you do that, you’re perfectly safe.”

Ferdinand Wilhelm divined that this referred to his hat, and drew a small breath of relief. And then they were off—up an endless, clicking roadway, where, at the top, the car hung for a breathless second over the gulf below; then, fairly launched, out on a trestle, with the city far beneath them, and only the red, white, and blue lights for company; and into a tunnel, filled with roaring noises and swift-moving shadows. Then came the end of all things—a flying leap down, a heart-breaking, delirious thrill, an upward sweep just as the strain was too great for endurance.

“Isn’t it bully?” shouted Bob against the onrush of the wind.

“Fine!” shrieked his royal highness, and braced himself for another dip into the gulf.

Above the roaring of the wind in their ears, neither child had heard the flying feet of a dozen horses coming down the *allée*. They never knew that a hatless young lieutenant, white-lipped with fear, had checked his horse to its haunches at the ticket-booth, and demanded to know who was in the Land of Desire.

“Only the son of the manager, and a boy friend of his,” replied Billy Grimm, in bad German. “What’s wrong? Lost anybody?”

But Hedwig’s lieutenant had wheeled his horse without a word, and, jumping him over the hedge of the *allée*, was off in a despairing search of the outskirts of the park—despairing, because those who had slain the father still lived to threaten the son. The terrorists! He shut his teeth to stifle a groan.

As the last horse leaped the hedge and disappeared, the car came to a stop at the platform. Quivering, Prince Ferdinand Wilhelm reached down for the despised hat.

“Would you like to go around again?” asked Bobby, quite casually.

His highness gasped with joy.

“If—if you would be so kind!” he said.

And at the lordly wave of Bobby’s hand, the car moved on.

III

THE old king was dying. To the Princess Annunciata, his spinster daughter, the news had come as she sat dozing in the royal box at the opera.

And the crown prince, who might now at any moment be king—the crown prince was missing!

The news had spread quickly. There was wild consternation in the palace. In the public squares crowds were silently gathering, and in every group there was whispering of the terrorists who had stabbed Prince Marmaduke and his young wife, and who might now—but then, such a child! It was incredible!

Across from the palace, with only the great square between, lay the Royal Opera. Old Adelbert, having locked up his opera-glasses—for, with the king dying, there would be no opera that night, nor, indeed, for no one knew how long—old Adelbert limped down the marble stairs and into the square, black with people.

The crowd was very still. Always it stood facing in one direction—toward that wing of the palace where the old warrior had his apartments, and where now he lay dying.

The curtains were open, and the casement of one window, which opened on a balcony, was thrown wide. Now and then shadowy figures passed it and once the Princess Annunciata, with wide, grief-stricken eyes, had come as if for air, and had stood for a moment, unconscious of the eyes below.

“A good woman!” said old Adelbert, finding himself, in the dusk, beside the *garde-robe* woman. “She remained unmarried to be with her father. And now he goes, and she is alone. It is the way of the world.”

Olga had been staring before her with dull and sunken eyes.

“They—have they found the—*kronprinz*?” she asked, thickly.

Adelbert stared.

“The *kronprinz*!”

“He is missing. I—I thought it was only a prank, but—two hours!”

“What did you say?” Adelbert was old, and the soft hum of the crowd confused him. “What was two hours?”

“Nothing.” She drew a long breath. “He is missing!”

Old Adelbert started.

“He is not there, in the palace?”

“No. He disappeared from the opera-house this afternoon. Every regiment in the city is out.”

And true enough, at that moment, the crowd surged back against them to allow the passage of a company of soldiers. For the first time in the knowledge of man the palace was practically unprotected. The king’s guard, every man of noble birth, marched swiftly through the crowd, young faces eager and intent under their tall black shakos, lanterns swinging in time to the muffled beat of a solitary drum. It was General Mettlich’s own regiment, and the crown prince himself wore its uniform on gala occasions.

Up-stairs, in an anteroom of the king’s bedchamber, General Mettlich, old friend and comrade of the dying monarch, had been placed under restraint. Twice, in frenzy over the loss of his charge, he had tried to fall on his sword. Now he sat between two guards, his face whiter than the king’s own, waiting for what must soon come—for the dreaded moment when, the archbishop having solemnly announced from the balcony the death of their old ruler, the people below would call to him, General Mettlich, to show them from the rail their boy king.

As the sound of the solitary drum came through the open window, the old warrior stirred. One of the guards—crowning humiliation, a captain of his own regiment!—laid a quieting hand on his arm.

Down in the square, old Adelbert at the same moment put a hand on Olga’s arm. His mind moved slowly.

“From the opera-house!” he said. “Impossible! There were the usual guards—unless—” He turned and peered into the *garde-robe* woman’s face. “It was *he* then!” he muttered. “And you knew!”

“He was so little, and he has so few pleasures,” cried Olga passionately. “It is always study, study—and I saw his eyes. They were like his father’s!”

Old Adelbert made no reply. He caught her arm, and, struggling, pulled her behind him through the crowd. Where it refused to yield, he brought down the iron point of his wooden leg, and his progress was one of oaths and groans.

“Where are you taking me?” gasped Olga.

“To the Princess Annunciata,” said the old soldier. “The child is only lost, wandering. It is not the terrorists, after all. *Gott sei dank!* Only—may he be found in time!”

Olga wept softly. She complained that her shoes were bad and her jacket old. If she had only time to go home, and put on her braided coat—

“Come! Use your breath to pray,” said old Adelbert roughly, and planted his iron toe on her shabby ones.

So she was led as a lamb to the slaughter. Finally they came to an open space under the stone balcony, where one sentry kept the crowd back, and walked sadly to and fro with his gun over his shoulder.

Adelbert stepped boldly into the lighted square, and faced the sentry.

“I would see the Princess Annunciata,” he said, and saluted.

The sentry stared.

“Adelbert, from the Royal Opera”—under his breath—“with news of the *kronprinz*.”

The sentry swiftly turned the geometrical right angle that is a specialty of sentries, and crossed with rapid strides to the arched stone doorway which was the old king’s private entrance.

“Adelbert of the Royal Opera, with news of the *kronprinz*,” he repeated to the sentry there.

And so it happened that into the anteroom where General Mettlich sat on a sofa between two captains of the guard; where the Duchess Hedwig, kneeling at a shrine with her sisters, was crying over a small silver photograph-frame; where the Princess Annunciata, distracted, walked backward and forward, wringing her hands—into this room, preceded and followed as far as the door by sentries, and then left to stumble into the bright light by themselves, came Adelbert of the opera-house and the *garde-robe* woman, Olga.

The Princess Annunciata stared. Then she came toward them swiftly. Old Adelbert could not kneel, having lost his leg fighting for the old man in the next room. Also, he was out of breath.

“Highness!” he said. “Highness!”

Then—oh, pitiful climax to a martial career! It came to him suddenly that just beyond that door his king lay dying; and old Adelbert burst into ignominious tears.

Women rise better than men to great emergencies. Olga forgot her worn shoes and the braided coat which was at home. She saw only the frantic eyes of the Princess Annunciata, and her fear left her.

“Highness,” she said gently, “the little *kronprinz* was—was not abducted by the terrorists. I think he is safe. He—he ran away, quite by himself. It was only a boyish prank, highness—the desire of a caged bird to fly.”

“Why, if you knew this, did you not raise an alarm?”

“I saw him running down the staircase of the opera-house, excellency. He looked at me, as if to ask me not to tell. And I did not.” She looked bravely at the princess, although she knew that her confession might cost her dearly.

“Highness, I have but this moment learned it,” said old Adelbert, getting his voice. “I brought the woman here at once. I thought it might distress the—his—majesty, and I—I was in the Bosnia campaign. He—he came once to the hospital, where I lay, and patted me—”

The disgrace of old Adelbert was complete. He broke into sniveling sobs. Throwing his arms up against the side of the doorway, he wept unrestrainedly into the velvet hangings, with the royal arms in gold and silver.

The Duchess Hedwig came over to Olga, and patted her on the sleeve of the jacket which was not the braided one.

“We are grateful to you,” she said softly. “No harm will come to you, I am sure. Will you tell the gentlemen in the next room what you have told us?”

So Adelbert and Olga were taken to another and a larger anteroom—a room all gold and blue, where the court was gathered, and where the prelates of the church and the generals of the army and the admirals of the fleet were waiting with white faces and strained eyes. And there Adelbert was himself again, and a man among his peers, wearing, instead of a jeweled order, his insignia of valiant service, a wooden leg with a sharp iron point.

And there he told his story.

IV

ON his narrow iron bed the old king lay peacefully dying. He had not moved for an hour, and it was the prayer of the court that he might not recover consciousness before the end. He would wish to see the little crown prince.

Beside him knelt his private chaplain. The three court physicians had withdrawn from the bed, and stood consulting in an alcove. The two sisters of mercy who had cared for the old king for years, stood looking down at him.

“I should wish to die so,” whispered the elder. “A long life, filled with many deeds, and then to sleep away!”

“A long life full of many sorrows!” whispered back the younger one. Her mild blue eyes rested on the writing-table, where, under the lamp, were the photographs of his dead wife, his slain son. “He outlived all that he loved.”

“Except the little Ferdinand.”

Their eyes met, for even here there was a question.

As if their thought had penetrated the haze over the old king’s faculties, he opened his eyes.

“Ferdinand?” he asked, with difficulty. “I—I wish—”

“Yes, yes,” said the younger sister. “You shall see him soon.”

Which, of course, was literally true, and no prejudice to the good sister’s soul. The chaplain had so instructed her. For if the terrorists—but God forbid!

The old monarch closed his eyes, but a moment later he opened them again.

“Mettlich?” he asked.

The elder sister tiptoed to the door.

“His majesty is conscious; he has asked for General Mettlich,” she said.

The Princess Annunciata took the general's hand and led him to the door of the bedroom.

“Courage!” she said. “And not a word!”

General Mettlich stood a second just inside the door. Then he staggered to the side of the bed and fell on his knees, his lips to the cold white hand on the counterpane.

“Sire!” he choked. “It is I—Mettlich!”

The old king looked at him, and put his hand on the bowed gray head. Then his eyes turned to the Princess Annunciata and rested there.

“A good friend and a good daughter! Few men die so fortunate, and fewer sovereigns!” said the old ruler, and placed his other hand on the head of the princess as she knelt beside him. His eyes, moving slowly, traveled to the photographs on his writing-table and rested there.

The elder sister leaned forward and touched his wrist.

“*Herr doctor!*” she said sharply.

The doctors came forward hastily, and grouped around the bed. Then the eldest of the three, who had ushered her into the world, touched the Princess Annunciata on the shoulder.

“*Madame!*” he said. “*Madame*, I—the king has passed away.”

General Mettlich staggered to his feet and took a long look at the face of his old sovereign and friend. Then, his features working, he opened the door into the large anteroom.

“Gentlemen of the court,” he said, “it is my duty—my duty—to announce—” His voice broke; his grizzled chin quivered. Tears rolled down his cheeks. “Friends,” he said pitifully, “our—our good king—my old comrade—is dead!”

V

THREE glorious times the car had made its trip to Pike's Peak and return. Three rapturous, breathless times it had swept into the sheet-iron gulfs of the Grand Cañon, only to climb out again of its own momentum. Three times it had swept through the blackness of the tunnels, and as many times had brought up in safety at the landing-platform.

Then, having no charm of novelty for him, the scenic railroad palled on Bobby. They climbed out and stood on the platform, and by the light of a gas-lamp the small American consulted a large nickel watch.

"Gee!" he said. "It's supper-time; I thought I was feeling empty. Say, can't you come home to supper with me?"

Ferdinand Wilhelm consulted his own watch. It was gold, and on the inside of the case was engraved:

To Ferdinand Wilhelm Franz Otto, from his grandfather, on the occasion of his taking his first communion.

It was seven o'clock! Miss Simpkins would be very irritable; she disliked waiting one moment for her supper. But perhaps she had been frightened, and if she had, a little more alarm would probably make her glad to see him.

"Do you think your mother will be willing?" he asked.

"Willing? Sure she will! The only person—but I'll fix *fräulein*. She's a Bohemian, and they're always cranky. Anyhow, it's my birthday. I'm always allowed a guest on birthdays."

So home together, gaily chatting, went the two children, along the cobble-paved streets of the ancient town, past old churches that had been sacked and pillaged by the very ancestors of one of them, taking short cuts through narrow passages that twisted and wormed their way between and sometimes beneath century-old stone houses; across the flower-market, where faint odors of dying violets and crushed lilies-of-the-valley still clung to the bare wooden booths; and so, finally, to the door of a grim building where, from the porter's room beside the entrance, came a reek of stewing garlic.

Neither of the children had noticed the unwonted silence of the streets. What few passers-by they had seen had been hurrying in the direction of the palace. Twice they had passed soldiers, with lanterns, and once one had stopped and flashed a light on them.

“Well, old sport?” said Bobby in English. “Anything you can do for me?”

The soldier had passed on, muttering at the insolence of American children. The two youngsters laughed consumedly at the witticism. They were very happy, the lonely little American boy and the lonely little prince—happy from sheer gregariousness, from the satisfaction of that strongest of human inclinations, next to love—the social instinct.

The porter was out. His wife admitted them, and went morosely back to her interrupted cooking. The children hurried up the winding stone staircase, with its iron rail and its gas lantern, to the third floor, where the parents of Bobby Treat made their temporary home.

In the sitting-room, the sour-faced governess was darning a hole in a small stocking. She was as close as possible to the green tile stove, and she was looking very unpleasant; for the egg-shaped darning only slipped through the hole, which was a large one. With an irritable gesture, she took off her slipper, and, putting one coarse-stockinged foot on the fender, proceeded to darn by putting the slipper into the stocking and working over it.

Things looked unpropitious. The crown prince ducked behind Bobby. The *fräulein* looked at the clock.

“*Du bist fünfzehn minuten spät,*” she snapped, and bit the darning thread—not with rage, but because she had forgotten her scissors.

“I’m sorry, but you see—”

“Whom hast thou there?”

The prince cowered. She looked quite like his grandfather when his tutors’ reports had been unfavorable.

“A friend of mine,” said Bobby, not a whit daunted.

The governess put down the stocking and rose. In so doing, she caught her first real glimpse of Ferdinand, and she staggered back.

“*Gott in himmel!*” she said, and went white. Then she stared at the boy, and her color came back. “For a moment,” she muttered, “I—but no. He is not so tall, nor has he the manner. Yes, he is much smaller!”

Which proves that, whether it wears a crown or not, royalty is always measured to the top of one.

In the next room, Bobby's mother was arranging candles on a birthday cake in the center of the table. Pepy, the cook, had iced the cake herself, and had forgotten one of the "b's" in "Bobby," so that the cake really read:

BOBY—XI JAHR

However, it looked delicious, and inside had been baked a tiny black china doll and a new American penny, with Abraham Lincoln's head on it. The penny was for good fortune, but the doll was a joke of Pepy's, Bobby being aggressively masculine.

Bobby, having passed the outpost, carried the rest of the situation by assault. He rushed into the dining-room and kissed his mother, with one eye on the cake.

"Mother, here's company to supper! Oh, look at the cake! 'B-O-B-Y'! *Mother*, that's awful!"

Mrs. Treat was very young and girlish. She looked at the cake.

"Poor Pepy!" she said. "Suppose she had made it 'Booby'?" Then she saw Ferdinand Wilhelm, and went over, somewhat puzzled, with her hand out. "I am very glad Bobby brought you," she said. "He has so few little friends—"

There she stopped, for the prince had brought his heels together sharply, and, bending over her hand, had kissed it, exactly as he kissed his Aunt Annunciata's every morning at eleven o'clock. Mrs. Treat was fairly startled, not at the *handkuss*, but at the grace with which the tribute was rendered.

Then she looked down, and it restored her composure to find that Ferdinand Wilhelm, too, had turned eyes toward the cake. He was, after all, only a hungry small boy. With the quick tenderness that all good women who have been mothers feel toward other children, she stooped and kissed him gravely on the forehead.

Caresses were strange to Ferdinand Wilhelm. His warm little heart leaped and pounded. At that moment, he would have died for her!

Mr. Treat came home a little late. He kissed Bobby eleven times, and one to grow on. He shook hands absently with the visitor, and gave the *fräulein*

the evening paper—an extravagance on which he insisted, although one could read the news for nothing by going to the café on the corner. Then he drew his wife aside.

“Look here!” he said. “Don’t tell Bobby—no use exciting him, and of course it’s not our funeral, anyhow—but there’s a report out that the crown prince has been kidnaped. And that’s not all. The old king is dying!”

“How terrible!”

“Worse than that. The old king gone, and no crown prince! It may mean almost any sort of trouble. I’ve closed up at the park for the night. The whole town is packed in front of the palace.” His arm around his wife, he looked through the doorway to where Bobby and Ferdinand were counting the candles. “It’s made me think pretty hard,” he said. “Bobby mustn’t go around alone the way he’s been doing. All Americans here are considered millionaires. If the crown prince could go, think how easy—”

His arm tightened around his wife, and together they went in to the birthday feast.

Ferdinand was hungry. He ate eagerly—chicken, fruit compote, potato-salad—shades of the court physicians, who fed him at night a balanced ration of milk, egg, and zwieback! Bobby also ate busily, and conversation languished.

Then the moment came when, the first cravings appeased, they sat back in their chairs while Pepy cleared the table and brought in a knife to cut the cake. Mr. Treat had excused himself for a moment. Now he came back, with a bottle wrapped in a newspaper, and sat down again.

“I thought,” he said, “as this is a real occasion, not exactly Robert’s coming of age, but marking his arrival at years of discretion, the period when he ceases to be a small boy and becomes a big one, we might drink a toast to it.”

“Howard!” objected the big boy’s mother.

“A teaspoonful each, honey,” he laughed. “It changes it from a mere supper to a festivity.”

He poured a few drops of wine into the children’s glasses, and filled them up with water. Then he filled the others, and sat smiling, this big young man, who had brought his loved ones across the sea, and was trying to make them happy up three flights of stone stairs, above a porter’s lodge that smelled of garlic.

“First,” he said, “I believe it is customary to toast the king. Friends, I give you the good king and brave soldier, Karl Otto II!”

They stood up to drink it, and even Pepy had a glass.

Ferdinand was on his feet first. He held his glass up in his right hand, and his eyes shone.

“To His Majesty Karl Otto II!” he said solemnly, in German. “God keep the king!”

Over their glasses, Mrs. Treat’s eyes met her husband’s. How they trained their children here!

But Ferdinand Wilhelm had not finished.

“I give you,” he said, in his clear young treble, holding his glass, “the President of the United States. The President!”

“The President!” said Mr. Treat.

They drank again, except the *fräulein*, who disapproved of republics, and only pretended to sip her wine.

“Bobby,” said his mother, with a catch in her voice, “haven’t you something to suggest—as a toast?”

Bobby’s eyes were on the cake; he came back with difficulty.

“Well,” he meditated, “I guess—would ‘home’ be all right?”

“Home!” they all said, a little shakily, and drank to it.

Home! To the Treats, a little house on a shady street in America; to the *fräulein*, a thatched cottage in the mountains and an old mother; to Pepy, the room in a tenement where she went at night; to Ferdinand Wilhelm, a formal suite of apartments in the palace, surrounded by pomp, ordered by rule and precedent, hardened by military discipline, and unsoftened by any love other than the grim affection of the old king.

Home!

VI

AFTER all, Pepy's plan went astray, for the *fräulein* got the china baby, and Ferdinand Wilhelm the Lincoln penny.

"That," said Bobby's father, "is a Lincoln penny, young man. It bears a portrait of Abraham Lincoln. Have you ever heard of him?"

The prince looked up. He knew the Gettysburg address by heart, and part of the Proclamation of Emancipation.

"Yes, sir," he said. "The—my grandfather thinks that President Lincoln was a very great man."

"One of the world's greatest. I hardly thought, over here—" Mr. Treat paused and looked speculatively at the boy. "You'd better keep that penny where you won't lose it," he said soberly. "It doesn't hurt us to try to be good. If you're in trouble, think of the difficulties Abraham Lincoln surmounted. If you want to be great, think how great he was. If you want to be good, just remember how good he was." He was a trifle ashamed of his own earnestness. "All that for a penny, young man!"

The festivities were taking a serious turn. There was a little packet at each plate, and now Bobby's mother reached over and opened hers.

"Oh!" she said, and exhibited a gaudy tissue-paper bonnet. Everybody had one. Mr. Treat's was a dunce's cap, and *fräulein's* a giddy Pierrette of black and white. Bobby had a military cap. With eager fingers Ferdinand Wilhelm opened his; he had never tasted this delirious paper-cap joy before.

It was a crown—a sturdy bit of gold paper, cut into points and set with red paste jewels—a gem of a crown. He was charmed. He put it on his head, with the unconsciousness of childhood, and posed and smirked charmingly.

From a far-off church a deep-toned bell began to toll, slowly.

Ferdinand caught it—St. Stefan's bell! He sat up and listened. The sound was faint; one felt it rather than heard it, but the slow booming was unmistakable. Only once before had Ferdinand heard it, except for mass, and that was when his uncle—

He got up and pushed his chair back.

Other bells had taken it up, and now the whole city seemed alive with bells—bells that swung sadly from side to side, as if they said over and over:

“Alas, alas!”

Something like panic seized Ferdinand Wilhelm. Some calamity had happened—some one was—perhaps his grandfather—

He turned an appealing face to Mrs. Treat.

“I must go,” he said. “I do not wish to appear rude, but something is wrong. The bells—”

The *fräulein* had been listening, too. Her face worked.

“They mean but one thing,” she said slowly. “I have heard it said many times. When St. Stefan’s tolls like that, the king is dead!”

“No! *No!*” cried Ferdinand Wilhelm, and ran madly out of the door.

VII

WITH the first boom of St. Stefan's bell, the great crowd fell on its knees. Other bells took up the dirge, and above their slow, insistent peal rose the nearer sound of a people mourning.

The archbishop came out upon the balcony, and stood for a moment with both hands raised. What he said no one heard, but all knew.

Hedwig's lieutenant, riding frantically up one street and down another, heard the bell. With his horse's bridle over his arm, he knelt on the cobblestones in the street, and prayed at the passing of his king's soul. And if the lieutenant shed a tear or two, why, there were few dry eyes in the city that night.

When he had crossed himself and risen, behold, running down the street, sobbing and panting, a small figure in blue serge trousers, a short Eton coat, and a rolling white collar, and with a gilt paper crown on its head. The boy, who did not recognize the lieutenant, having cried much and run more, gasped:

"Take me to the palace instantly!"

Without ceremony, Hedwig's lieutenant flung his king into the saddle, and, springing up behind him, rode wildly to the palace.

The Princess Annunciata had come out of the death chamber, and stood staring at the archbishop.

"What are we going to do?" she asked. "*What are we going to do?*"

From a corner the Duchess Hedwig sobbed aloud. She was sitting alone, holding the silver photograph-frame.

And then, suddenly, the door was flung open, and in it, with the lieutenant behind, stood the boy king.

"My grandfather!" he said, and, seeing their faces, fell to sniveling into a very soiled pocket-handkerchief.

General Mettlich opened the door from the room where the court had assembled. He saw the disreputable figure of his sovereign, and, with a cry of thankfulness, he knelt and kissed the small, not over clean hand.

Ferdinand Wilhelm straightened his shoulders. It had come to him that he was a man now, and must do a man's part in the world.

"I wish to see my grandfather," he said, fighting back the tears.

General Mettlich rose and stood looking down at him.

"Your people are waiting," he said gravely. "To a ruler, his people must come first!"

And so, in the clear light from the room behind, Ferdinand Wilhelm I first stood before his people. They looked up and saw the erectness of the small figure, the steadiness of the blue eyes that had fought back the tears, the honesty and fire and courage of this small boy who was their king. And they rose and cheered mightily.

Down below, in the crowd, a young American woman clutched her husband's arm, and together they stared up.

"Dick!" she said. "Dick, it's Bob's little friend!"

"Nonsense!" he retorted, uneasily. "It looks like him, but the thing's absurd. See, they've crowned him already!"

"Oh, they haven't crowned him!" She was half weeping, half smiling. "The absurd little chap! They've forgotten to take off his paper crown!"

VIII

THE king, having been pronounced safe and well by the court physicians, had a warm bath and was put to bed. There was much formality to this process now, but finally he was left alone with Oskar, who had put him to bed and got him up since he had passed the wet-nurse stage—alone, of course, as much as a king may be alone; for there were guards outside each door and below his windows.

“Oskar!” said the king, from his pillow.

“Your majesty?”

Oskar was gathering the royal garments, which were to be burned, as Heaven only knows where his majesty had been, and what germs—

“Have I a small box anywhere, a very small box?”

“The one in which your majesty’s seal ring came is here, as is also the larger one which had schoolroom crayons in it.”

“Give me the ring-box and my trousers,” said Ferdinand Wilhelm I, and sat up in bed.

Having received both articles, he proceeded to feel carefully in all the pockets of the trousers. At last he found what he wanted, and the new Lincoln penny rested in a cushion of white velvet, on which were the royal arms.

Ferdinand Wilhelm looked carefully at the penny, and then closed the lid.

“Whenever I am disagreeable, Oskar,” he said, “or don’t care to study, or—or do things that you think my grandfather would not have done, I wish you’d bring me this box. You’d better keep it handy!”

He lay back and yawned.

“Did you ever hear of Abraham Lincoln, Oskar?” he asked.

“I—I have heard the name, your majesty,” ventured Oskar cautiously.

“My grandfather thought he was a—great—man. I—should—like—”

The excitements and sorrows of the day left him gently. He stretched his small limbs luxuriously, and half turned upon his face. Oskar pulled the blanket around his shoulders, and put out the light.

Half an hour later, General Mettlich passed the guard and tiptoed into the room. He knelt by the bed in silence, and into the old soldier's prayer went all his hopes for his country, all his dreams, all his grief for his dead sovereign and his loyalty to his new king.

In his stone-floored room behind a milkshop, old Adelbert prayed also. The events of the evening had awakened his warrior spirit again.

"Oh, God, make him a soldier!" he prayed. "Let him lead his country to victory!"

Olga, the *garde-robe* woman, sat late that night sewing, for the *garde-robe* alone would not support her.

"How like his father he looked!" she said. "And he smiled at me, God bless him!"

The Duchess Hedwig, having sent away her maid, sat in front of her dressing-table and looked long at the silver photograph-frame.

"Dear little Ferdinand!" she thought, and then her mind traveled to the young lieutenant. After all, she thought, the young officer was noble, and such things as she dreamed of had been known. "I hope I shall look well in black!" she reflected, and held one of her black silk stockings to her cheek to see.

The American mother bent over her boy's bed, and kissed him softly on the lips.

"I wonder," she said, "in all that great palace, did any one kiss the little king good night?"

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

A cover has been created for this eBook.

[The end of "*Long Live the King!*" by Mary Roberts Rinehart]