

# The Weary Kings | A Modern Romance

By Richard Voss

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THE Royal Palace, Winter, 18—

**T**he century-old ancestry of my House has something most respectable about it, something even demanding worship, deadening as its presence is to me. From the beginning there was neither the word nor the deed for my House, but only the duty. In my most noble House one is born out of duty, one lives out of duty, does good to one's best ability out of duty, avoids evil to one's best knowledge out of duty, permits himself to be married out of duty, dutifully brings dutiful children into the world, dies at last out of duty and surely will arise from the dead some time out of duty.

With all great things, naturally all small things are duty for us. But there really is nothing small for us. The length of the court train, the white cravat for dinner and the black for evening tea are exactly as sacred greatneses as any act of State. So must we stand, so move, so speak, be it the evening "circle," or a revolution, or the end of the world.

And how old am I that I assume the right to utter such criticism of our Court? Recently, I became 23. God be with me! Still so young and already—but was I ever young? That, too, belongs to the many, many matters over which I brood.

From the Royal Palace.

That I was born at all is a calamity for me, who must live with the whole ballast of dim tradition, with all the jumbled mass of venerable household articles of my ancestors, with a chaos of ideas that I cannot grasp were I to grope and search for an eternity.

Happily, I am but the second Prince. As such, I might even cite Hamlet in all peace of soul, for the State of Denmark cares not if I am or am not—and it does not ask how I am.

My father is a most excellent ruler, inch for inch a King. At the same time inch for inch the first officer of his State, the first servant of the people. He works with all his thoughts, with all his powers. He works unceasingly, untiring.

Of course, that latter remark is not true! The King of this land is weary. I have watched it secretly, have discovered it long ago. The weariness of the King goes about in the House like the restless ghost of Hamlet's father. This, too, have I discovered: The weariness is a characteristic of our House. During a century all the Kings of our House have been weary, mortally weary. Wearily they lived, reigned, labored, fulfilled their duties, mortally weary they went in the end to their last rest. For more than two centuries the weariness of the Kings of our House has been our family ghost, our "White Lady."

Naturally, His Excellency, the Lord Marshal, knows what to do with the specter about as well as the newest kitchen maid. As His Excellency does not exactly belong among the clear minds, our spiritus familiaris, is decidedly uncomfortable to him. But the ghost belongs once and for all to the Royal household, so what can a Lord Marshal do? Nothing, except to treat the specter with all due reverence, make obeisance and tell it to its face that it is not a specter at all—not the shadow of a specter. On the contrary, flesh and blood—and Royal flesh and blood, too. And for the rest, he may comfort himself with the knowledge that every House has its family ghost.

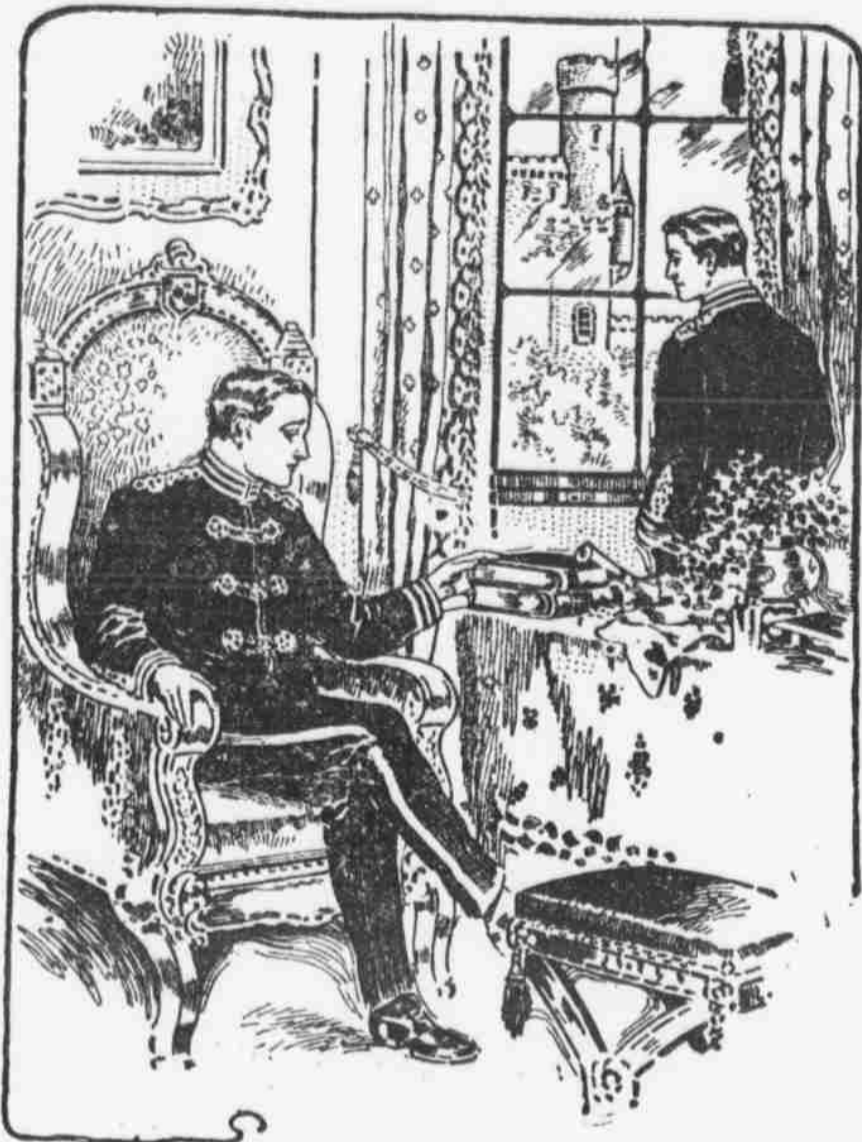
Of course, the weariness of my father is a secret of State. If the King's eyes were to close at a table, if he were to drop, tired to death, in audience, no lackey would have the impertinence to see it and His Excellency, the Lord Marshal, would rather allow his head to be most humbly chopped off than to permit himself the remark: "Your Majesty is weary. Your Majesty should go to bed."

No human being in the whole Kingdom sees and feels my father's weariness in such measure as my mother, and in the whole Kingdom not one would deny it so positively, actually swear that it did not exist, as my mother.

This is a woman, the Queen!

The Crown Prince was born only a year earlier than I, but seems to be ten years older. But my brother does not wish at all ever to have been young or to be it still. His wish would not agree with his duty, and the Crown Prince is duty from head to foot, duty with every thought, duty with every sentiment—therefore inch for inch one of the true, the genuine. For his genuineness there is the proof of the right carlap and the family wart on the left cheek. And for his genuineness there is that other trait—my young brother, too, is beginning to be weary.

I love my brother. He is an honest being. But I do not believe that he has great thoughts. How can he have them, since it is one of his most noble duties to have as few thoughts of his own as possible? What should he, with the weary lines around the eyes, do with great thoughts in his exhausted Epigonian soul?



BEFORE HE LEFT ME HE STOOD AT THE WINDOW AND LOOKED INTO THE COURT YARD.

Fortunately for him, he is conservative to a truly wonderful degree, splendidly orthodox.

God, I thank Thee that I—  
For what do I thank God? That I am "only" the second Prince?

At any rate the State of Denmark may congratulate itself that it is so. I would, were I not only the second Prince, set the universe afire to burn out what is rotten in the State of Denmark.

Our first Sentimental Lady plays an important role. She becomes the fashion. When she appears a great part of the Court goes to the play. Sometimes the Crown Prince appears in the little box. Then there is a play at the play, although one acts as if one saw only "Egmont" or "Cabals and Love" or something else that is classic.

In such nights the first row turns the opera glass ostentatiously toward the stage, which is something that is not its usual habit, and the Court society has developed it into a veritable art to converse of the Crown Prince and the Sentimental Lady, superficially yet enthusiastically, apparently always critically, and yet always admiringly. His Royal Highness maintains an attitude of measured opposition. And this is supposed not to be a comedy!

The House-ghost walks daily, receives reports, holds council about inner and outer affairs, gives audiences, appears at table, at great receptions and solemn functions of State. Everybody sees the ghost—nobody appears to see it. Only I stare straight into the face of the spectre, hail it: "Who are thou?" receive no answer, brood and brood.

With us there is a second spiritus familiaris, close at the side of the first, truly the shadow of the shadow. This is the personal physician of my father. The Herr Privy Councillor is a great professor of psychiatry, he is a specialist and authority. The famous man is everywhere. Softly he treads. But I can hear his step. I hear him forever by the side of the King, close to his side!

But the Herr Privy Councillor, too, must not be seen among us. To speak of him, to treat of him as a real being, is equal to lese Majeste, high treason. His appearance affects me like sorcery. What eyes the man has! Like a sea-thing, so clear, so deep, so sad—endlessly sad, as if he saw the primal reason of things, the solved problem of the world, the whole misery of mankind.

What is it that he sees when his glances sweep from the King to the face of the Crown Prince, slow, dreaming, sorrowful—endlessly sorrowful? I watch those glances, to catch them when they search me, bore into the depths of my being, sound my soul.

Occasionally I catch them. They look at me, steady, sorrowful. Then it seems to me as if I must leap up and scream: "Now he sees my fate! What is my fate? I will know it, I will!"

But I remain dumb. The all-seeing, deathly sad eyes turn away from me. I brood and brood.

I am a miserable soldier. In the whole land they know it, and still they torture me slowly to death with this frightful militarism. It belongs to the tradition that it is the duty of even the second Prince to be good soldiers. But I do not possess the organ for the ancient historical art of opening the vein of humanity from time to time according to the rules of the best strategy, to pour a little bloody deluge over a land, so that only the righteous remain alive. Had I the misfortune to be the Crown Prince, and had I to become King some time, and should God so curse me that I should have to make war—horror of myself would selse me.

Since heaven has made a black sheep of me, why, in heaven's name, cannot they let me be and remain one? They do not need me in the machine of State, not even as oil that might smear some mysterious little wheel and make it hum. My minor number two does not count at all in the problem of high politics. I am only a number. Every hour of my life is a number. Without pause I am being registered, scheduled. That might remain so for all that I care, if only this immeasurable loneliness did not exist. All around me—everything—empty, barren. Not a single soul in this world that is my world. In the universe no heartbeat that answers mine, that is related to it. Everything silence and dumbness. Therefore I write. I must write. It is breath for me; else I would choke. Often it is to me as if each word were a cry of agony. And to feel so old already, with my hair still blond!

## II.

### In the Royal Palace.

The two gentlemen—the spiritual and the worldly—who are assigned to me knew as little what to do with me as I with them. Both have historical names, but their names have nothing to do with the case. Their bearers are not individuals, but charges—Court charges!

Since recently I have my own Court, and I reside in the oldest part of the palace, the so-called Prince's Wing. The palace dates back to the fifteenth century and is historical from cellar to roof.

Everything around me is historical. Historical are the irregular court yards, the gloomy corridors, the wide hallways, the desolate rooms. Throughout the gray monumental building every arabesque, every water jet, is historical. Historical are the faded frescoes, the yellowing tapestries, the blackening panelings, the shadowy ancestral portraits, historical are the furnishings, the table services, the silver; historical the moths, the dust, the atmosphere. Great historical memories move at midday through the whole house. Even from the walls there streams history.

In such surroundings dwells my young-old Princely I, and broods over the fly on the wall, which, of course, is historical, too. The two gentlemen assigned to me have too much to do with the past to know anything certain about the present. I cannot even interrogate my old valet, since he luxuriates exclusively in the glorious knowl-

edge that his father, grandfather and great-grandfather poured Eau de Cologne over the most noble pocket handkerchiefs of a Royal Highness in the Prince's Wing. And my young lackey wears the historical livery with a dignity that forbids every condescending confidence.

How do I live?

By the clock I am awakened, attend mass, the morning ride, the breakfast. By the clock I hear the lectures of many professors, the psychology of peoples, national economy, domestic history, world history, military science, other sciences. By the clock I wait on their Majesties, visit the Crown Prince, receive this and that one, during which time I listen to this and that, say and think this and that. By the clock I drive, practicing in fencing, shooting, ball playing. By the clock, toilet; by the clock, dinner.

I fear I am very unhappy.

Strange! I am supposed to be "popular." My valet let it slip today.

"Does not your Royal Highness know how popular His Highness is?"

I did not know it, truly and really did not know it.

Popular—what is it that sounds and rings so strangely out of that word? A second Prince popular? How could I arrive at it?

To be popular means to be loved generally, warmly beloved! To be loved by all, loved by a whole nation. To be loved—what have I to do with the people; what have the people to do with me? Nothing.

To be popular one must do something; something good, great; something that earns love, wins love—the love of a whole nation! But I have done nothing. And I shall not do anything—cannot do anything.

One can love only what one knows. Does the nation know me? No. How, then, can it love me? And I do not know it either, consequently do not love it.

All that the nation knows of me is that I am the second Prince. All that I know of the nation is that it has been plebeian through eternities, will remain plebeian through eternity, and withal bears a great, glorious name—nation.

How that sounds! Almost more majestic than "Majesty." Why, one even speaks of the "Majesty of the Nation." And this common-illustrious mass loves me? And that without seeing an advantage in it for itself?

But it remains curious that I am supposed to be "popular."

I feel shame for my thoughts. They should be good and pure. I should be humble, warm-hearted, amiable.

There are so many dissonances in me, so many sharp, false notes. And I long so for—for what? For all that is beautiful, good and great.

It cannot be expressed.

From the Royal Palace.

Great things are doing. Every day there are mysterious cabinet sessions, secret reports, mysterious hints and looks. Ah, if one can only be mysterious in the State of Denmark! Secretly they deal with a foreign government, secretly they make treaties. The Ambassador drives to the Ministry every day, is received often by their Majesties, is in extraordinary favor with the Most High ones, and shines in consequence as a second sun at Court. His Excellency the Lord Marshal, the old, venerable factotum of our House, talks about with a face as if a world rested on his shoulders. The haughty Madame Lord Marshal would give her life to help the modern Atlas carry the world-ball. All the Court ladies and Gentlemen would assist and help to carry, but His Excellency holds fast to it.

Today the Crown Prince visited me.

As his habit is, he wandered restlessly through the room for a long time. Now he stood here, now there, picked up this object and that, all in silence. On his forehead, between his brows, there appeared the little, sharp, painful wrinkle that the King has, too. I noticed it today on my brother for the first time. I had to look at it always as if it were a peculiar characteristic. At last the Crown Prince said, in his customary quiet, shy way: "Has the Lord Marshal notified you?"

"Of what?"

"I must travel and you must accompany me."

"Whither?"

"To —"

"What must we do there?"

"I have become engaged to the Princess Mathilde."

"Oh!"

Silence, long silence. The Crown Prince walked to and fro. I sat and looked at him, looked at the little, sharp wrinkle, which appeared to me more and more like a deep scar.

At last I said: "You do not know her at all."

"No, I do not know her at all. What difference does that make?" Again silence.

"Perhaps she will please you," I encouraged him. "She is said to be charming."

"Yes, charming."

And then silence again.

I should have liked to speak more with the Crown Prince, but what could I say? Before he left me, he stood at the window and looked into the courtyard, which lies like a dark abyss even in the sunlight of day.