

The Weary Kings

A Modern Romance
By Richard Voss

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CHAPTER VII.

THE first truly festive and joyful meal of my life! Never again can I have another like it—never again.

A young man and a young girl—the two youngest and most handsome—brought the food; in a mighty iron pan a mountain of golden brown dumplings; in a huge earthen bowl of stewed cherries.

It was as if a race of giants was to be sated. Pan and bowl were placed on shining wood trays before Miss Fritz. She served me first, and then the Count, for each one two—no, three—dumplings swimming in purple juice.

I had my high-heaped plate before me and may have looked down at it somewhat hopelessly, for suddenly I heard a peal of laughter opposite me. The fairy creature under the Christ picture was laughing at me. That she was a fairy or some other unearthly being I recognized by the laugh, for only a Nixie or a Fairy could utter so silvery, so bell-like, so sweet a laugh. First I was immensely startled. Then I laughed over my fright and helplessness, and when I began to laugh everybody else began, too. Even that finished man of the world, the Count, and Miss Fritz laughed—laughed at me. It was splendid!

I did like all the rest, ate and drank and enjoyed it immensely. What I had on my plate I ate—really and truly. Imagine! A second mountain of dumplings and a second lake of cherry sauce were brought in by the two youngest and most handsome ones and also devoured. If I had not been ashamed I would have eaten a third time of the dumplings. But I said, "No, I thank you," modestly, and the child and then all of us laughed again like anything. Now, if that was not a merry meal!

Then I heard the low, sweet voice again as it offered thanks. I saw the wonderful eyes lowered again, the pale, slender hands folded reverently. How beautiful the girl was under the martyr picture of the Christ and the crimson wreath of the red pinks.

Then the happiest and the most festive meal of my life was at an end.

Of course, we had not only eaten and laughed, but conversed. What I said I do not know now. I can only remember the others, and the pleasure I felt in my fine Count, who managed to make even Loid talkative. He understands wonderfully well to deal with the people.

My handsome, defiant Loid talked of his hunting life. Miss Fritz told of the terrors of winter when she was snowbound in her Alpine farm. Even the stablemen know of many important matters which needed telling.

Although the child had so intoxicated and enchanted me that the whole world had become a dream to me, I noticed with what calmness and dignity, with what fact, these people know how to behave in the presence of the son of their King. Pleasant, too, was the moment when we arose and all in turn gave us their hands, to the mistress, the Count and me. When I turned to look for the child it had disappeared—vanished like an elfin thing. Ah, then I became sad.

Now the thing was to observe good manners and let none notice anything. But how if I should never see the dear form again?

Miss Fritz proposed to us to go into the arbor, whither she would send the coffee. I begged her not to let us drink it without her, but dared not mention the name of the lovely child, as if I might thereby betray my young, and ah, so hopeless love, and thus desecrate it.

After Miss Fritz left us I said to the Count suddenly:

"How did you come to make a part of the 'train' of a Royal Prince—you, a proud, free man?"

"I was tempted to learn to know this world."

I thought: "It is a mournful world." Aloud I said: "Learn to know it as fast as possible and flee it."

"I should like to remain with Your Royal Highness until you send me away."

"It is not in my power to keep you or to send you away. But that you know yourself." And after a pause I added in a low voice:

"They will take you away from me as soon as they observe that you are liked by me. We may love others as little as if we were monks. Our love appears to be equally sin and guilt."

He answered nothing. I held out my hand and said:

"As long as they let us remain together let us be friends."

I was frightened at my own daring. Only in the intoxication in which my whole being was could I have risen to such boldness. But I was glad that I had achieved it, for the count grasped my hand with a powerful pressure and held it fast in his for a space.

So everything came to me in this day to make it the most eventful and rich of my life. First friendship and then love—it was almost too much to bear.

Count Gebhardt and I sat in the arbor.



JUDICA UNLOCKED IT AND THREW BACK THE HEAVY LID.

Since he was my friend now I said to him:

"Please seek out Loid's mother, and if money can help her, so help. I am not able today to see a piece of human misery, well as it might serve me to know it."

He looked at me silently as if he did not understand. So I had to make confession of my disgrace.

"Yes, then, I listened. Hereafter you will surely despise me, but you must know it. When I heard my name in the arbor I stood still. Deeply as I was ashamed, I stood still and heard. I heard that you liked me, that you consider me a good man, but fear that before long I will prove myself to be one of my kind. I do not ask you now why you believe this of me and what is the matter with us all. I know that you must not tell me about it. I would be a bad friend were I to attempt to lead you to do something that would violate your duty. If you do not feel that you must despise me too much for my eavesdropping, if I am still loved by you, you will surely help me to earn the good belief of Miss Fritz. Please help me! I need help, need a friend so much!"

I spoke with face turned aside, with choking voice. What a day this was! When I turned back again after a while—the Count said no word—I met the grave, sympathetic face of the man who was willing to be my friend. From his eyes there spoke the same pity that I had heard in the voice of Miss Fritz when she called me the "poor Prince." Why do all who love me pity me?

I had intended to keep silence, to ask no questions. Suddenly I sprang up and cried passionately:

"What is it with my father? Answer me! I beg you, answer me!"

And he replied, "The King is ill."

"And my brother?"

"The Crown Prince is ill. At least he himself thinks so."

"He thinks himself disordered in mind?"

"I may not name it."

"You are right. Forgive me. I had intended not to ask. But I—I am healthy, surely. Look at me and see how healthy I am! Therefore you should not pity me. And I—I remain healthy. My poor father, my poorest brother!"

I hid my face in my hand and sobbed. And gently a hand was laid upon my shoulder, the hand of a friend.

Gebhardt went to meet Miss Fritz and managed to detain her. Meantime I became calm. Then we sat in the arbor—unfortunately only we three. I wanted to embrace Gebhardt when he asked:

"Your niece is not coming?"

"The child has work in the garden."

"She is charming."

"She is good an innocent."

Did you not say your niece had no one on earth except yourself?"

"No being on earth."

I exclaimed, "Poor thing!"

The orphaned child filled me with sorrow in this moment. Yet at the same time I was glad that Judica, too, was a poor, lonely, human being. It seemed to me as if this fact lessened the abyss-like gulf of separation between us. Why were we separated at all? Because she is a poor orphan and I am a poor son of Kings.

Gebhardt asked more about her.

"Have her parents been dead long?"

"The mother died at her birth. The father, who lived only for her, died a year ago."

"Did you not say the little lady had come straight from a convent school?"

"Since her sixth year she has been in a Ursuline convent. When she left it this year she found only graves."

I repeated: "The poor little one!" and added after a few minutes: "Thank God that she is in harbor with you. With you nothing can happen to her, with you one feels secure against storm and sorrow."

Never before had I thus spoken to a human being. How could I have done it before? For the first time in my life I felt the liberating and delivering power of the spoken word.

I felt Gebhardt's astonished gaze upon me. And the good Miss Fritz wore a smile that flowed into my soul like sunshine. She looked at the Count as if she would ask: "Was I not right?" But he had a serious, thoughtful, almost sorrowful face, such as I had not seen on him before.

Then came Loid to ask if I intended to visit his mother. He said we must go betimes if we hoped to return to the Sea-Alp before night.

I begged the Count: "Go with Loid to his mother and tell her that I send my respects and hope to call on her myself."

Gebhardt arose, hesitated, and looked at me. Then I appealed to him with my eyes:

"I beg of you to go and let me stay here, let me be happy, happy one single time! This day will never come to me again."

Then he went.

I remained awhile in the arbor and tried to talk. Then I said with all possible innocence: "I know that you are a good housekeeper, and good housekeepers always have more than enough to do. Pray treat me as a friend whom you need not consider to your discomfort. Attend to your affairs and I will stroll around. In half an hour I

will be in the arbor again."

I departed without waiting for an answer.

I went into the garden. An aroma met me as if I had entered a church filled with incense. Two maids were picking a plant with gray-green leaves and simple blue-violet flowers. I asked them what it was and they told me that it was lavender. I stood beside them, secretly searching the garden for Judica, when one of the two said, gravely:

"Miss Judica is yonder, among the raspberries."

Doubtless I blushed like fire. I stood like a trapped schoolboy, stayed awhile and tried to talk about plants, and at last saluted and withdrew slowly—very slowly. I am sure they laughed behind my back. It was as if I could hear their giggles. They, too, had seen through me at once.

So she was there among the raspberries.

Passionately though my beating heart drew me to her, I forced myself to go in another direction. In the great garden I followed paths that led far away from her. I wandered among flowers, and, excited as I was, I still was glad to know them all, because thus I felt myself not such a total stranger in the world.

Suddenly—I know not how—I stood close to the raspberries.

It was a veritable grove of plants. But there was nothing to see of a picker. I plunged into the pathless wilderness, pushed the fruit-laden branches carefully apart and sought the delicate black form longingly.

I did not find her. And then I called her name, softly, "Judica!"

My heart beat so loudly that I did not know if I had really uttered the name. It seemed as if he must hear it beat and answer with hers, "Here am I."

Then I called a little louder: "Judica! Judica!" Almost I cried: "Dear, dear Judica!"

But all remained silent. Again and again I could hear only the beating of my young, and, oh, so ungovernably loving heart. Then I thought the branches near me had moved. No air stirred, and there must have been another cause.

The next instant I stood beside her.

We were both frightened when we stood opposite each other, so suddenly and so close. Neither of us dared to speak. I held my breath, for not even my breath must touch the pale child with the holy eyes.

So we stood, silent, without motion.

At last I succeeded in stepping back a little—only a little. And then I felt the