

The Weary Kings

A Modern Romance
By Richard Voss

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WHEN we returned I sent for Count Gebhardt and told him that we had seen Lohs. The Count sent for Tony at once. Tony reported. Lohs had gone to his new post on the other side of the mountains as ordered by us before the King arrived. But he had remained there only three days, after which he had disappeared. Through another huntsman he sent word to the forester that they could not force him back unless they sent gendarmes, and that the first who laid a hand on him was a dead man. And the second and third—

The Count asked why he acted so madly. Tony replied: "Through jealousy, no doubt. He is jealous lest somebody climb up to the White Emperor Alp where his sweetheart is."

"But nobody goes up there."

"Somebody might go, and Lohs will let none approach her, none, not even our master, the King."

The Count rebuked him sternly, but Tony only shrugged his shoulders and said: "Lohs trusts none of you. He knows what happened to his own mother, and why did they send him away just as the King arrived? That made him wild."

The Count had scarcely reported this to me, when a messenger arrived from Miss Fritz. He brought a letter for Gebhardt in which Miss Fritz warned him that Lohs had been seen with his mother. For me there was a basket of raspberries with a card on which was written in a child's hand, "The last raspberries."

"The last," it sounded in my brain and soul as if every summer had passed, as if spring never would blossom again, birds sing, flowers unfold, or young creatures love, kiss and be happy.

Gently I stroked her writing and whispered, "Judith! Dear little Judith!"

Then I sat down and tried to write to her, tore up the paper, began again, and failed. I rose, stood at the window and looked into the night.

Up there my father had hung over the abyss, invulnerable to death because he would live in order to wear the crown.

Was the mountain weight that fell upon his brow with that crown worth the fight through those long, terrible hours of storm? Would it not have been better for him if he had not possessed the talisman of that holy gold hanging over his head; if he had opened his arms and permitted the waiting abyss to receive him? Is it a fortune for us to be stronger than death?

Since it would be no fortune for the land to have a ruler in me, I would, did I cling some night to a rock, open my hands voluntarily. Yes, I would be weaker than death, and for that I would receive a royal reward; a grave under God's free, shining sky.

I still stood at the window, staring into the night, when I was ordered to attend the King. Midnight had passed.

In the middle of the night my father had decided to sign the State Document that was called "Regency of the Crown Prince," and that was—the abdication of the King. We all knew it; the King, too.

I found him in his cabinet; with him were the Minister of State and the Privy Councillor. Both were pale, but very calm; unnaturally calm was my father.

The King said to me: "There is a little formality in which you are to be a witness. In your presence I propose to sign a document that my Minister of State has been so exceedingly kind as to lay before me."

And he pointed, with an indescribable gesture at the Minister, who could do nothing better than to bow humbly. The old gentleman held the document in a trembling hand.

My father strode toward the desk—in for inch a King.

The Minister requested His Majesty's permission to read the paper. His voice trembled like his hand.

"Must that be?"

"If your Majesty will have the great goodness."

My father sat down and beckoned to me to sit near him. After the reading was concluded, everything was so still for a moment that I feared the beating of my heart would be heard. What would happen now? Something was sure to happen, something terrible?

"Lay the document here."

The King seized the pen, hesitated and—

signed.

He had abdicated.

How the terrible happened I cannot recall. I saw the King leap up and in the next instant he had both hands around the throat of the Privy Councillor, choking him. The attack occurred so suddenly that the victim could not utter a sound. Lackeys had to tear the King from his prey, and remove him by force. Now he is being guarded. The Privy Councillor is still alive.

All who had been witnesses were sworn by the Minister not to disclose a word of what had happened.

I visited the Privy Councillor. He lay in bed, in a wild fever. I sat down by him and strove for words. Finding none, I could give him only my hand. I think that I cried. At least, he pacified and comforted me. He did that to me.



THE KING SEIZED THE PEN AND SIGNED. HE HAD ABDICATED.

At last I managed to ask when he would depart.

"Depart?" said he. "I shall remain with the King."

"That you must not."

"No one else knows the King as I know him."

"Pardon. You do not know him as well as you think, else this could not have happened."

"I have foreseen it long ago, but I could not hinder it."

"What? You were prepared for this?"

"The King hates me. That belongs to his malady."

It was to me as if he looked at me just then with that glance that made me, too, hate him. Mechanically I repeated: "That belongs to his malady."

"All sufferers of that kind hate the man of whom they know that he knows their disease."

I ejaculated: "But your presence increases the King's pain."

"My place is at the side of my sick master. Were I to leave it I should be like a faithless soldier. And my successor would be just as deeply hated without knowing how to help him so well."

"You can help him?"

"Without me the King would have had to sign that document years ago."

"With what means would you delay the final crisis so long?"

"By keeping him in the condition to remain King."

"You mean that the consciousness of his royalty was stronger than even—madness?"

"That is what I mean."

"What the King must have suffered!"

"What has the Queen not suffered?"

"Did the King not suffer?"

"Your Royal Highness may be assured that his Royal Highness did not suffer at all. People with his malady feel convinced that they are perfectly healthy."

"Will my father suffer now?"

"Now he will be distracted, because he failed to kill me. But soon he will become calm again, because he will hope that he may succeed the next time."

Chapter XI.

The sick King wishes to hunt chamois. More than a hundred beaters are to drive the game toward him. He will shoot all alone. Not even his Adjutant may participate. As far as I am concerned, happily no one even thinks of me as a sportsman.

My father, with his intimate knowledge of the locality, has designated all the spots

where his stands are to be. The selection of almost all of them is awful; at the mouths of ravines and in deep gulches where not a beast can escape. Surely the assistants will not be able to load as fast as the King will be able to shoot. It will be, not a hunt, but a massacre. The stands are so near the Sea-Alp that, with a good glass, I can see the drive as if I were looking at a stage from the Royal Box.

The King hunts every day.

Before dawn the beaters have to be in the mountains. From my window I look on. I find the spectacle a brutal pleasure that makes me think of the old Roman amphitheaters. I wish not to see the butchery and find myself drawn to the window every day.

I cannot help but feel a feverish excitement when the first animals appear at the opening of the ravine that leads them to certain death. They try to climb up the precipice on the side and beaters drive them back; they try the other side and beaters drive them back. They must go downward! And the King shoots, hour after hour. He becomes angry because darkness comes so early in the autumn.

The King has devised a new kind of sport. Near here is a wall more than one thousand feet high. It descends sheer without a break into the valley. The King has ordered a drive to lead to the top of this wall and he will stand below and see the game come hurtling down almost to his feet, mangled and smashed.

Of course this must not be permitted!

But it has been permitted!

The King commanded his Chief Forester and the creature obeyed! The King stood at the foot of the precipice, looked on and laughed. Some of the beaters, they say, wept up there.

Today the hideous spectacle was to have been repeated. The beaters refused to do it. The King raged and is being guarded now. So there are still human beings in the world: woodcutters and peasants.

Now I know where I saw that little wrinkle between the brows first. It was on an antique bust, the portrait of a Roman Emperor. I think that it was Domitian.

Again I stood, today, before my mirror and looked at my face to see if the begin-

ning of the wrinkle of the Caesar is beginning to show on my forehead. No, no, no! Perhaps the curse will pass me by. I am not going to be a king.

At last I know why my father desired my presence on the Sea-Alp. He sent for me today. We were alone, or apparently so. He called me to the window and whispered:

"Do not turn around. Do not move, for we are being watched! They want to put me in a straight waistcoat—me!"

"You must know that they have given out that I am insane, because they wish to make that lunatic, your brother, King. Since I will not do them the favor to go insane, they are trying to murder me. I have not touched a morsel of food for months, because everything is poisoned. I would have starved long ago, but a King cannot starve! Every night Saint Agnes comes to me and brings me food and drink. That is why I have had you here. You are not like your brother. You are kingly, soul of my soul. Your mother and your brother, the lunatic, I curse. But you I bless. My blessing will put the crown on your head if I should die. But I am immortal!"

"Now, listen!"

"Tomorrow morning when the sun rises they are going to try to kill me with twenty times 20,000 stabs. Your mother intends to stab me first, then your brother and then my whole nation. You know what they say, that I have become a raging beast that would tear my whole people to pieces!"

"Lately I made millions and millions of them leap down a wall of rock. They flopped downward like meal sacks. You shall play this Royal game yourself. It is merry."

"Even while they were carrying me to this place I made my plans. You and I, the two real Kings, must flee together. We may not cross the lake, for it is red from the blood of the millions. We must cross the Alps!"

"Over there stand the armies and await us! I will ride at their head and you shall be at my side. We shall enter my capital, strangle the Queen, nail the lunatic, your brother, to the cross; torture that hound, the Privy Councillor, and behead and hang all our adversaries. My kingdom will be desolate like a desert. But on the vast field of death I will sit throned in everlasting majesty and you shall sit at my right hand."

These mad words the King whispered as