

The Weary Kings

A Modern Romance
By Richard Voss

(Copyright, 1933, by J. W. Muller.)

I HAVE proved my deepest soul. I know myself; I wish that I were my father's eldest son and the heir of his crown and realm; I wish my brother, the King, had felt himself too weak, had permitted his terror to conquer him and had abdicated in my favor.

Oh, God, Thou Master of Heaven and of Earth, be merciful to me, for I envy my brother the crown.

The King is wonderfully good to me and I think: "If I were in your place!" With such thoughts I can look into his eyes, speak calmly with him, shake his hand, without feeling the slightest compunction. How is such a thing possible?

Because I do not wish to be King for my own sake, but for the sake of the nation that loves me and for which my rule would be a misfortune!

That is it! Had these unjust, these cursed words never been said to me, I would never have had these monstrous, fratricidal thoughts. That is it! They have bitten deep into my soul and brain until nothing remained in me except the burning determination to become King that I might give the lie to those maddening words!

According to ancient usage—everything is ancient with us—the new King retires eight days before his coronation into a Carthusian monastery that is connected with the Palace by enormous hidden galleries.

There are great ceremonies. In the presence of the whole Court, led by the Grand Prior, the train goes slowly away, with the terrible psalms of the Monks in their ears, and they seem to step with the King into the grave.

For a full week the King will remain entombed in his cell. None may approach him. With fasting and prayer he prepares himself for the martyrdom, the acceptance of the crown. His sparse food is handed to him through an opening in the wall. None dare speak to him, not even the Grand Prior.

I am afraid.

What I thought, hoped, wished in secret, may become true; the King in his cell is thinking of abdication. He called the Grand Prior to him. He is the only one who may reach him now except a physician. The reverend father has been with my mother. Secret cabinet meetings are being held. The rumor must have reached the people; for a multitude waits before the Palace. Once I stepped to the window. They saw and recognized me and—but I withdrew at once. Else it might have happened that the nation in this hour would have—

Now the Privy Councillor is with the King.

I must kill these thoughts. I know that I will be a lost man if I cannot liberate and purify myself. I shall be lost forever.

What is happening?

They are keeping it secret from me—from me who would succeed the King if he remains weak. Even my mother deceives me. The ministers meet, the Council of State is called, and I, the heir of my brother, am shut out.

I shall demand explanation! They must answer to me! Do they not know that the people, the whole people, stands by me, that it believes in me, loves me and cheers me, "Long live the King!"

Stop! Stop! The King is not dead yet.

Today I went to see my mother. I went to beg her to tell me why they kept me in ignorance while they were deciding the fate of the land and of me.

In the last-ange-room I found the new Court Lady. When the lackeys threw the doors open for me, she arose and made her correct bow, which annoys me so just because it is so correct. And with it she had a way—

With elaborate politeness I said to her: "Pray, Countess, announce me to Her Majesty."

"Her Majesty cannot receive your Royal Highness."

"Why not?"

"I may announce no one."

"Is my mother ill?"

"Her Majesty has the Ministers in council."

"So much the better."

I strode forward in order to pass in to my mother unannounced.

Then Gebhardt's sister cried out:

"I received strict orders from Her Majesty to permit none to enter. Should Your Royal Highness pass me I must consider myself as dismissed by Her Majesty."

I stood still and listened, with my old pleasure in independent, proud speech toward one like myself—with my old pleasure, Heaven be thanked. I bowed and said:

"With your permission I shall wait here until the Council is ended and the mother is able to receive her son."

The Countess took her seat again at my request and I sat down near her, in excited, ill-natured mood, as I was well aware. For a time we said, or rather I said, common-

place things. Then, I know not how, I broke out with:

"I congratulate you on your appointment to Court. There are such great things here for you; the splendor and glory of a Royal Court! I believe there is nothing more splendid or glorious in the whole world."

I spoke with all the sharp irony, the bitter sarcasm to which her calm poise drove me. She looked at me steadily. Heaven knows why I had to think at that moment:

"She knows how it is in you. She knows that you desire the crown."

Then something strange happened. As if I were under a spell, I stepped toward her. Instead of rising, she kept her place calmly. I stood before her and said with a choking voice:

"Are you, too, of the belief that it would be a misfortune for the country if those inside there should let the King abdicate?"

"Your Royal Highness wishes to hear my views?"

After awhile—we held each other's eyes steadily—I got the reply:

"It depends on the power."

"You consider my character too weak?"

"Your Royal Highness would have to overcome your character."

"In order not to be a degenerate ruler? As you see, I am so indiscreet as to demand the truth from your character. Pardon me if I demand too much."

I had not demanded too much. This girl, whom I had despised, possessed the courage to tell the man who might become King, with her steadfast glance, that she considered him as belonging to a degenerate race.

Could I but give the lie to the prophetic glance of the courageous woman! Again I had the wish that seized me when opposed to our medical spiritus familiaris. But I have underestimated the Countess Thyra's soul. That pleases me. There is something free and great and strong in her.

The Council ended and I was admitted to my mother. But I did not find her whom I sought. Her son who was King wished to escape the crown; her son who was to become King wished to throw himself into her arms. I was driven by the terror of the fate of our house, the fear of myself. On her mother heart I longed to find shel-

ter, peace, refuge from myself. But before the tall, motionless form in the trailing black garments I was forced to let my arms sink.

My mother stood in the center of the room, looked at me without moving and said:

"The King will remain King! What, then, do you wish?"

What do I wish, unblest that I was? Her fixed gaze and the almost inimical tone of her voice hurt me like something physical. Striving for breath, I uttered:

"At least I wish to know why it would be a misfortune for the country if my brother were to persist in his weakness! He will not persist, you tell me. Good! May his rule be happy and glorious for our race and for the country. Only tell me why my rule would be unhappy and shameful! You must tell me!"

I saw my mother's features softening. But she remained silent.

Approaching her and raising my hands, I begged:

"Mother, tell me. It devours me. It broods forever. See! It is something that may madden—must madden me. Tell me before I go mad. Am I a wicked creature? I suffer, mother. Help me, mother, dear mother. I have never asked you for anything; think, never! And now I ask you for my soul."

So I prayed to my mother; and then—then she told me.

And as she told me she threw both arms around my neck, pressed my head to her bosom, wept over me till my face was wet with her tears. Weeping, she whispered to me, and—now—now I know it. I am indeed my father's true son, for even now my father's malady is said to show in me. Even now!

Have I not a great mother?

Chapter XIV.

To tell such a thing to her son, her beloved son! For my mother loves me. She knew why I came to her, what I wished to hear from her, and she told me the other thing. There must have been such mothers in Sparta.

But it is not true, it is not true, not true; I am well! They are mistaken. The wise physician, too, is mistaken. Such things occur. I am the only healthy one of our race! Sick, very sick, is the King whom they declare to be the only healthy one.

He has inherited the sickness of our house, of my father.

I am healthy in body and soul. I can think logically; twice two is four. Well, then! But it is horrible to consider how a few senseless ones can drive a sane man out of his senses.

In that fearful moment I had the strength to comfort my weeping mother. I had never seen her cry before, for Queens, as everyone knows, do not weep, even when they are Queens of Misery like my mother. Even I looked on with dull amazement at the stream of real tears! Surely they were scalding drops that burned my mother's heart.

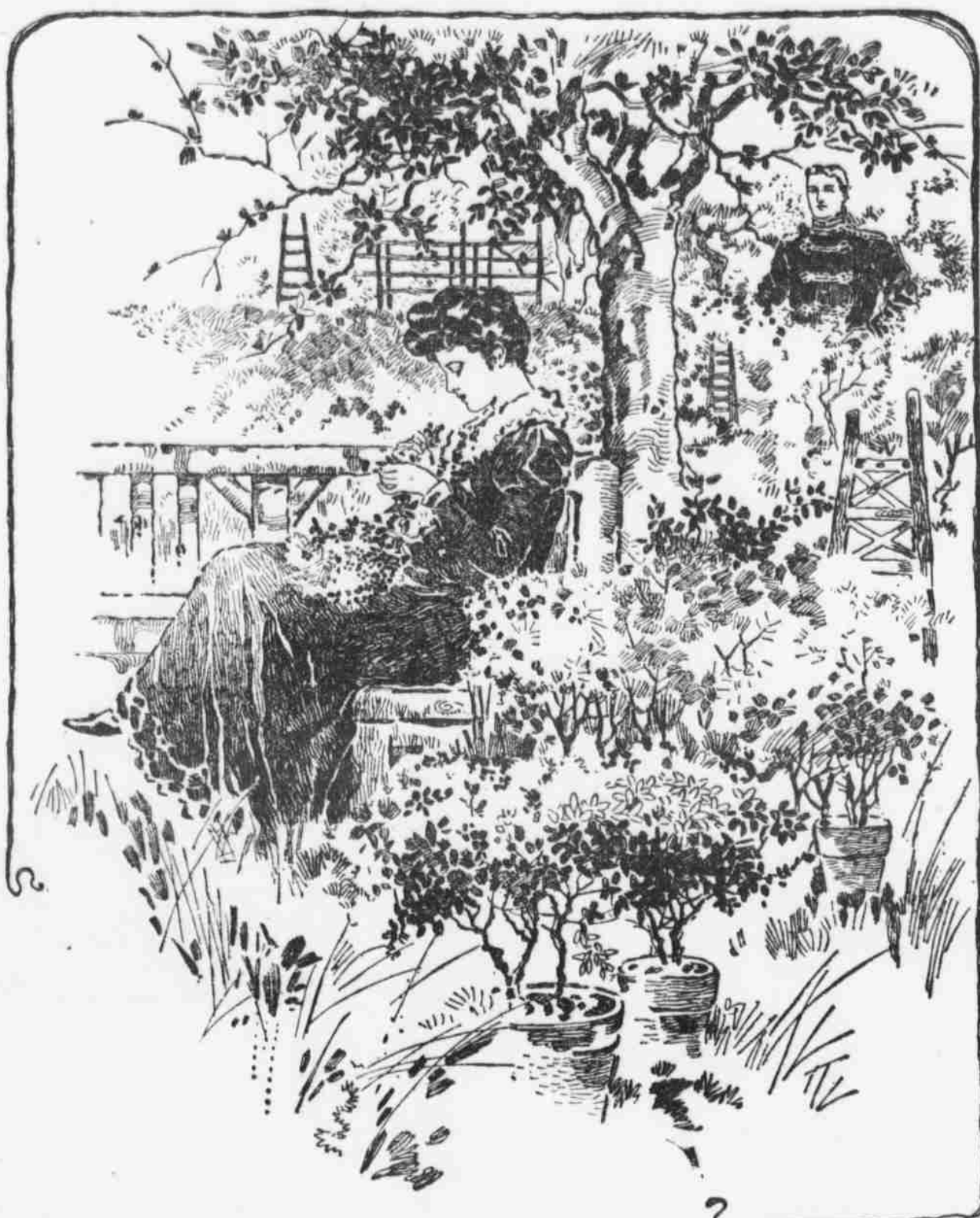
We remained together a long while—for the first time! For the first time we were mother and son. Things had to go far with the State of Denmark before we got to that.

And further than that, I have the strength to remain silent. I long to speak, cry, scream. But I hold my mouth shut tightly. I long to call in our spiritus familiaris. But I conquer myself. I long to throw myself on the breast of my one friend and sob on his bosom. But I do not permit myself to shed a tear even in my chamber.

Today the King arose from his tomb, and the most imprudent sparrow dare not chatter about what happened in the cell. I have not yet seen my resurrected brother. I have not seen my mother, either, since the hour in which she wept over me. How shall I look into their eyes? My brother, too, will know that I have learned how it is with me "even now." I mean how it is said to be with me, for it is not true, not true, not true! They lie! The day will come when I can prove the lie to them. And then—

However, I need not fear as to how I shall look at mother and brother. So long as we "celebrate," we are less family than ever. And now we are representatives from head to sole in the highest of wedding and coronation style.

My adjutant has handed me a long list. Everything is in it, named with painful system. Every article of clothing, from the cravat to each ribbon of each Order, is scheduled and just how often each must be changed. Tonight I shall have to lock myself in my room and learn the whole thing by heart. If it will only go into my sick head! Gebhardt will have to rehearse



SUDDENLY MY HEART BEGAN TO THROB, MY BREATH STOPPED, AND I STOOD BEHIND HER.