

Boothby Guy

Long Live the King!



Guy Boothby
Long Live the King!

«Public Domain»

Boothby G.

Long Live the King! / G. Boothby — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	10
CHAPTER III	16
CHAPTER IV	22
CHAPTER V	26
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	31

Boothby Guy

Long Live the King!

CHAPTER I

How strange it seems, after this long lapse of time, to look back upon those days, and after all that has come between. When I think of the child whose curious fancies, strange whims, and still stranger life, I am about to portray, I find myself inclining towards what is certainly a feeling of bewilderment, and one that might almost be said to be akin to physical pain. That the little fellow I see in my mind's eye, playing so happily on the far side of that River of Years, can be *myself*, the man sitting in this chair, who, pen in hand, is trying so hard to arrange his thoughts, is to me scarcely believable. Between the two there looms so vast a difference, that it would appear as if no possible connecting link could serve to unite them with each other. Whether I am better or worse for the change must be left for more competent judges to declare.

Looking back, I can scarcely determine which is the first event in my life that I can recall. I have always declared that I have the very faintest recollection of being held up by my mother at a window to see my father present some new colours to his favourite regiment of Guards in the square below. But if, as they say, that occurrence happened exactly five-and-twenty years ago, and the records of the Regiment are there to prove it, my memory must be a more than ordinarily good one, seeing that, at the time, I could not have been more than three years of age. Imperfect though that recollection may be, however, it is quite certain that I can distinctly recall the day, two years later, when my brother, the Crown Prince Maximilian, being then a big boy of nine, led his regiment past my father on parade for the first time. I can also remember crying bitterly, because I was not permitted to accompany him, which eagerness on my part, so I have been informed since, was taken by my mother's Ladies-in-Waiting to be a sign that a great military career awaited me. That I have never so far justified either their hopes or their good opinion of me must be set down by the charitably-minded as the result of a lack of opportunity. In a sense, however, I must confess it has proved almost true, but how it came about will be told in its proper place. In the meantime, having a long story to tell, and not much space to tell it in, it is necessary that I should return to my earliest recollections with as much speed as possible.

To enter upon my story proper, it is only fit that I should commence with a brief description of the life of my poor father. Maximilian the Second, King of Pannonia, as all the world is aware, was a monarch foredoomed to trouble from his cradle. His succession to the throne was the result of an accident. But for a fatal shot, fired in the excitement of a wolf hunt, and which stretched the heir lifeless upon the snow, he would in all human probability never have been called upon to undertake the responsibilities for which he was, not only by nature, but also by inclination, so totally unfitted. A scholar of the finest type, essentially a recluse, more at his ease in his library than in the Council Chamber, happier when holding a pen than when carrying a sword, I must admit it is to me a matter of wonderment that he succeeded even as well as he did. A loveless marriage, thrust upon him by the exigencies of State, when his inclinations tended in another and very different direction, marked the next downward step in his career. My mother was the eldest daughter of Alexander the Tenth, King of Gothia, and was as ambitious as my father was the reverse. Where he was only too glad to find an opportunity of effacing himself, she, at first, boldly courted the admiration of the world. Among other things, she insisted upon all the extremes of court ceremonial being observed, and under her rule the sleepy old palace woke to new life. Neighbouring Sovereigns were repeatedly our guests, entertainment followed entertainment, each conducted on the most lavish scale, until the country, which at first had inclined towards applause, began to show unmistakable signs of disapproval. Things

were said in the Reichsrath that should have enabled any one less absorbed in his own private affairs than my father, and less wilful than my mother, to have seen how foolish was the course each was pursuing. When, eventually, the Prime Minister of the day, the Count von Marquart, ventured upon a remonstrance, my mother cut him short with a hasty speech that was destined to rankle in his heart and to lay the foundation-stone of the misunderstanding that, for the rest of their lives, existed between them. Fortunately, however, for the affairs of men, Time is able to accomplish what argument and diplomacy cannot hope to achieve. The duties of motherhood, and a long and serious illness, which followed my advent into the world, put it out of her power to adhere to the dangerous course she had hitherto been running. Much to everyone's surprise, when she was fully recovered, it was found that the craving for excitement, which she had formerly possessed, had completely left her. The change, however, as is so often the case, came too late; the mischief was already done. The Pannonians as a race are, so it has been said, amongst the most undemonstrative of the inhabitants of Europe. It is possible that this may be so. I am not going to admit or to combat the accusation. This much, however, is quite certain: if they are phlegmatic, they are also retentive; and, having once derived an impression, or allowed themselves to become prejudiced in any given direction, they seldom, if ever, return to their original condition. For this reason, while the change in my mother was apparent to all who were brought into immediate contact with her, and by hearsay to many who were not, the greater proportion of the populace were of the opinion that every calamity that befell the nation for years to come was attributable, either directly or by inference, to her recklessness and her extravagance in the past. That the great ceremonials and festivities, balls, concerts, and hunting parties, were no longer to be witnessed by the public eye, was, in their minds, no sort of proof that they did not exist. With the strange perversity that so often characterises the actions of a nation, those who had been most dazzled and delighted when she had lifted the sombre old court life from its former stagnation into its then glittering effervescence now constituted themselves her most bitter accusers. Thus the inevitable drew nearer, while my mother attended to her nursery with as much devotion as could have been displayed by any *bourgeoise* parent, and my father pored over his books in the north-west tower of the palace, translating Ovid when he should have been pulling at the ropes of Government, and enjoying the selfish pleasures of the student when he should have been endeavouring to prevent the ship of State from foundering. The country, being delivered over to the mercy of party politics, rushed blindly on towards the maelstrom that was to engulf it, and with it our devoted family.

Having thus formally introduced my father and mother to your notice, it is necessary that I should now perform the same ceremony for my brother and myself. Surely two lads were never more different. Max, the Crown Prince, was, as I have already remarked, my senior by four years, and the incarnation, so far as I was concerned, of all that was manly and heroic. At the time of which I am about to tell you, and which was the turning point of our fortunes, he was twelve years old, advanced for his age, and showing promise of development into a tall and powerful man. In face he resembled our mother more than our father; he had her dark, piercing eyes, and, if the truth must be told, he was also gifted with a very large amount of her imperiousness and love of power. It was said that he was a born ruler of men, and some went even so far as to predict that when he ascended the throne, Pannonia, under his influence, would resume her proper place as the leading nation of the earth. But, alas! how strangely things fall out. That which we count a certainty seldom comes to pass, while it has become a commonplace amongst us that the unexpected nearly, if not always, happens. As an example, I must put on record an incident as strange as, at the time, it was disconcerting.

One day Max and I, accompanied by our tutor, were riding on the road that leads from the city towards the village of Schartzvam, at the foot of the mountains. Five miles from home, the pony Max was riding cast a shoe, and it became necessary for us to call a halt at a blacksmith's shop, in order that the defect might be remedied. We had dismounted, and were standing at the door watching the work in hand, when a party of gipsies made their appearance in the street. The majority had passed us and turned the corner; only a withered beldame, hobbling along with the assistance of a stick,

remained behind. On seeing us she paused, and, addressing Max, asked for charity. Upon his giving her a coin she inquired whether he would like his fortune told in return. Doctor Liechardt, feeling a certain responsibility in the matter, was about to order her away, but Max, who had always a touch of the mystical and romantic in his character, begged him to allow her to remain.

"She shall tell my fortune," he said, taking some money from his pocket and handing it to the old woman. "Who knows but that she may be able to give me a hint which may some day be of use to me?"

The worthy doctor, who never willingly thwarted Max in anything, was perforce compelled to agree. Accordingly he held out his hand, and the old crone took it. For a few moments she studied its lines attentively.

"You have started on good terms with the world," she began at last. "Fortune favours you now, but the time will come when she will not, and you will be obliged to go on your way alone. You have a proud heart, and desire great things. When the time is ripe, you will walk rough paths, and will travel to a far country. Your dreams will go with you, but, when you return, it will be too late. Your heart's desire will have passed from you. I can say no more."

"You have not said very much," replied Max, with what I could not help noticing was not his usual laugh. "Nor is what you *have* told me encouraging. However, I suppose it will prove as true as most of your prophecies. And now, Paul, you must have your fortune told. Perhaps you can find something better in your lucky bag for my brother."

At first I would have drawn back, being at that time rather a timid boy, but Max's orders were always law to me. I accordingly held out my hand, at the same time giving the old woman the necessary money wherewith to cross it. As before, she bent over and studied the palm attentively. I can see her wrinkled face now, peeping out, with its raven tresses, from beneath her coloured hood. As soon became apparent, the prophecy in my case was to be infinitely happier than that she had offered Max. I was to retain the love of my friends, to enjoy long life, to possess a beautiful wife, and to see many happy children clustering round my knee. She had got this far when she looked into my face. What she saw there appeared to startle her.

"I read it on his hand," she resumed, as though speaking to herself. Then, looking fixedly at me once more, she continued, but with greater respect than she had hitherto shown: "Go on and prosper, child; though they know it not, the people's heart goes with you."

Then, in a strange sing-song voice, and still looking steadfastly at my face, she repeated the old distich, which has been popular in the country for many hundreds of years. Translated roughly into English, it runs somewhat as follows:

"Pannonia's King shall firmly sit,
So long as Michael's Cross doth fit."

After bidding me remember what the gipsy had said, and before we could stop her, or question her further, she had left us and was hobbling after her party. Even now I can feel the awkwardness of the next few moments. It had all been so sudden and so unexpected, that it had taken us completely by surprise. I was only a child, and I knew I was not to blame; nevertheless, I looked appealingly at Max as if for forgiveness. His handsome face was black with passion. Placing my hand upon his arm, I asked him to forgive me, begging him not to be angry at a gipsy's idle words, but he threw my hand off, saying that he was scarcely likely to allow himself to be made angry by an old fool. Be that as it may, however, for the rest of the ride he held himself aloof from us, only speaking when he was spoken to, and then with a bitterness that was older than his years, and, if possible, more uncomfortable than his silence. In my own mind I believe it was from that day that the estrangement which afterwards existed for some years between us might be said to have dated; yet the mere fact that I happened to possess – though at that time very faintly – the peculiar cross-like indentation

between the brows, that, tradition says, was bequeathed to us by Duke Michael, the founder of our House, and which it is maintained none but those destined to rule the kingdom ever possess, should not have made any difference in our feelings towards each other.

One more digression from the direct path of my narrative, and I shall be at liberty to proceed at my best pace.

Among certain nobles of the kingdom, and one who commanded an influence in some quarters, second only to that of the King himself, was Prince Ferdinand of Lilienhöhe, a brilliant man in every way, but a bitter enemy of the Ramonyi family. It was his misfortune that he was never able to allow himself to forget that, more than a hundred years ago, one of his family had, for a brief period, sat upon the throne of Pannonia, and this knowledge had proved the evil factor of his life. Out of it he had permitted an idea to take root and grow, until it had passed beyond his control. Being well thought of by a certain section of the community, particularly in the northern portion of the kingdom, where he had large estates, he did not despair, even now, of accomplishing his desires. Plotting and scheming were integral parts of his nature, and it seemed out of his power to check them. It is not of the Prince himself, however, that I am going to speak, but of his only child, his daughter, who was destined in the future to play a most important part in the drama of my life.

One morning, just as we were preparing to leave the palace for our daily ride, we were the witnesses of what promised to be, and might very easily have become, a terrible catastrophe. A carriage, drawn by a pair of handsome horses, had just turned from the Jungferngasse into the Michael Platz, when something caused them to take fright, and they dashed off at terrific speed in the direction of the palace. In vain the coachman, assisted by the groom beside him, endeavoured to restrain the frightened animals. They had become unmanageable, and it looked as if nothing could save the carriage, and any one who might be in it, from annihilation. Even now I can feel the terror that possessed me as I watched them come dashing headlong across the square, making straight for the iron gates of the palace. Instinctively I put up my hand to shut out the sight from my eyes. Then I heard a crash, succeeded by a short silence which in its turn was broken by the screams of the injured horses. When I looked again, the guards had turned out, and some of the men were assisting the coachman, who fortunately was not hurt, with the animals, while the officer of the day was removing a little girl from the carriage to the guard-room beside the gates. It was miraculous that she had not been hurt, for, as it was afterwards discovered, she had only fainted from the shock she had received. My mother, who had witnessed all that had transpired from one of the windows, immediately sent a servant with instructions that the child was to be brought to the palace, where she could be properly attended to. This was done, and presently the little one, who had been examined by our own surgeon, was in my mother's boudoir, recovering from the effects of the fright she had received. Side by side, unconscious of the part she was one day to play in our several destinies, Max and I stood and watched her. For myself, I can say that never in my life before had I seen so dainty and bewitching a little creature. Beautiful as she is now – the loveliest woman in Europe, they say, and I believe they speak the truth – she was even more beautiful then. There was a spirituality about her – a frailness, if I may so express it – that was almost fairylike.

"You have nothing to fear now, little one," said my mother, who held her in her arms. "You have had a wonderful escape, and you must thank the good God for your preservation."

Then, turning to one of the servants, she asked whether he had discovered whose carriage it was. The man paused for a moment before he replied.

"Why do you not answer?" my mother inquired. "Surely you must know?"

"I have been given to understand, your Majesty," the man answered respectfully, "that the carriage was the property of His Highness the Prince of Lilienhöhe, and that this young lady is his daughter, the Princess Otilie."

It was well known in the city that the Prince of Lilienhöhe had at last reached the end of his treasonable tether, and that, only that day, to save him further disgrace, he had been given a stated

time in which to quit the country. You may, therefore, imagine the effect the man's words produced upon us, and my mother in particular. Being a child, I could not of course understand what it meant, but the name of Lilienhöhe had of late been of such ominous report in my ears, that I could scarcely fail to be struck by the importance of the incident. The very title of the Prince who was to go into exile had an ogreish ring about it for me; and, though I had been told on good authority that he was a man of remarkably handsome appearance, possessing the most pleasant manners, and was devoted to little children, I was very far from crediting the statement. In my youthful mind a man who was notoriously inimical to my own family, and who had publicly called my mother the Enemy of Pannonia, and had stated his wish to have us turned neck and crop out of the country, could never be anything but a fiend in human shape. To see this beautiful creature before me, however, and to have it on reliable evidence that she was his daughter, somewhat disconcerted me. I looked at the little maid seated in my mother's lap with a fresh curiosity, and endeavoured to take soundings of the position. It was beyond me, however. Could she be a second Gerda (I was busy with Hans Andersen at the time); and would she turn out to be a robber maiden who tickled reindeers' throats with a sharp knife, and laughed to see their fear? I was in the midst of my cogitations, and was vaguely wondering what the Count von Marquart would say if he knew that his enemy's daughter was in the palace, when the little maid, yearning for younger sympathy, I suppose, slipped from my mother's knee, and, crossing the room to where I stood, took possession of my hand.

"I like you," she said, looking up into my face with her beautiful eyes; and from that moment the pressure of her tiny fingers, and the remembrance of the look she gave me then, have been among my most cherished memories.

By my mother's orders, a carriage had been brought for her, and one of the ladies-in-waiting had been deputed to take her back to her father's house. While the necessary preparations were being made, we passed out, still hand-in-hand, into the great vestibule.

It was the first time for more than a hundred years that a Ramonyi and a Lilienhöhe had walked together, and there were some who looked upon it as an augury.

It was quite certain that she had not yet altogether recovered from the shock the accident had given her, for her face was still pale, and her hand trembled in mine.

"What is your name?" she asked in childish accents, as we stood before the statue of the Great Founder, the same who had bequeathed to me the Michael Cross of famous memory.

"Paul," I answered: "Paul Michael George." I gave it in full in order that the fact might be more clearly impressed upon her memory.

"I shall 'member," she returned gravely; and for the second time she added – "I like you."

At this moment the carriage made its appearance, and the Baroness Rabovsdin, to whom my mother had entrusted the responsibility of conveying the child back to her father's house, went down the steps and entered it. With a gravity beyond my years, I led Princess Ottilie down to it, and helped her to her seat beside the Baroness. Then the carriage drove away, and that was the last I saw of the daughter of the Prince of Lilienhöhe for many years to come.

CHAPTER II

Although my father, acting on the advice of his Ministers, had taken the decisive step of banishing the Prince of Lilienhöhe from the country, he had not been able altogether to rid himself of the trouble the latter had occasioned. The Ogre had been growing larger and uglier for years, and, on looking back upon it now, I am of the opinion that it was his last, and I cannot help thinking his greatest, imprudence, that brought about the disastrous end. Be that as it may, however, the result was quickly apparent. The contempt the populace felt for us was to be observed in every direction. My father, who seldom left the palace, was not brought into actual contact with it, but I remember on one occasion my mother and I being hooted while driving in the Graben. What we had done to deserve it I cannot say, but the incident was sufficient to show me a side of my mother's character that I had never encountered before. In her home life she had, as I have observed already, developed into a quiet and loving woman. Now, in the face of danger, her old spirit reasserted itself, and I can recall the flash that lighted her eyes, and the contemptuous curl of her lips, as she faced the crowd that surged about the carriage. Turning to me she took my hand and bade me not be frightened; then, looking at the Baroness Niedervald, who was sitting opposite, and who appeared as if she were about to collapse, added sternly, "I am sure you are not afraid, Madame, so I beg you will not permit them to think so."

The Baroness, who stood in greater awe of my mother than a thousand street ruffians, pulled herself together, and immediately repaid their jeers with looks of scorn.

Ten minutes later we were back at the Palace once more, and my father had been made acquainted with what had occurred. A curious smile flickered over his sphinx-like face as he heard the news.

"You fed your hounds too well at first, my dear," he said, with that cynicism that always characterised him. "They are grumbling now because the supply of bones is finished, and they are compelled to fall back on stones."

I did not realise the force of this allusion then, but it has become more plain to me since. One thing is quite certain – it angered my mother beyond measure, and from that time she carried no more complaints to him. Even had she done so, it is doubtful whether it would have been of any use. "Go to von Marquart, your Majesty," he would have said. "He is the real king; I am only the figurehead – the puppet, if you like."

As a matter of fact the time had gone by for active interference, and all that could now be done was to wait, and to endeavour, as far as possible, to hold the rabble in check, until some new sensation should arise to divert their attention. To make matters worse, the country was split up into factions; thus for every step gained in one place we lost ground elsewhere, and, by propitiating one, we enraged another. Some were for deposing my father outright, and inviting Prince Ferdinand to mount the throne; while others went even so far as to contemplate doing away with Royalty and nobles altogether, and establishing a Republic, in which every man was to be the equal of his fellow, and caste should be swept away entirely. They could not realise the fact that their present ruler, if he had done nothing else, had at least permitted them to enjoy the benefits of peace. He was not ambitious like his neighbour on the north, nor aggressive like his fellow on the south, and in consequence the country flourished as it could not otherwise have hoped to have done. It has often struck me since that a nation is not unlike a defective dam. So long as it holds together it is solid and watertight, but let even the faintest trickle of moisture percolate through its massive sides and more will surely follow; later, a gaping rent will show itself, where first the dampness appeared; then, in one brief instant, before man can prevent it, the mighty flood bursts its bonds, dashes forth and sweeps all the old order away before it.

Being at this time only nine years old, I could not, of course, appreciate the gravity of the situation. But I was quite aware that those I loved were in trouble. It was brought home to me more convincingly by one little incident than by anything else.

It was nine o'clock on a winter's night. Snow was falling, and the palace courtyard was covered with a white mantle. According to custom, Max and I had been to our mother's room to bid her good-night, and had crossed the great hall on our way to our own apartments, when, at the top of the grand staircase, we met the Prime Minister, Count von Marquart, ascending. As a rule we were afraid of him; his manner was harsh and overbearing, and it had been wittily observed that there were only two persons in the world, the Count von Marquart and himself, with whom he was on terms of anything approaching intimacy. To-night, however, we noticed that he was disturbed about something. On seeing us, he paused and bade us a polite good-evening. Then, gazing into our faces with those cold, piercing eyes of his, which seemed to look one through, he patted us on the shoulders, heaved a heavy sigh, and muttering "Poor lads, poor lads!" followed the servant along the corridor in the direction of my father's study.

For the next few days Council followed Council, and from each the Ministers drove away with gloomier faces. I have since learnt that the failure of the crops in the northern provinces, and the consequent dearness and scarcity of bread, had precipitated matters, and forced the hands of those who were really at the bottom of the mischief. Somehow I do not fancy that my father even at this, the gravest crisis of his life, properly realised what the near future had in store for us. Having devoted his attention to other matters for so long, he had lost his grip of the public pulse, and in consequence was unable to realise the deadliness of the disease that was taking possession of his country. Like the dipsomaniac, who, in his own heart, is quite aware that to indulge his craving is to court a certain and most terrible death, my father persisted in his former line of action – or shall I say *inaction*? – finding, it would seem, a recondite pleasure in contemplating the approach of ruin. With my mother it was entirely different. Wayward and impetuous as she had once been, she now proved herself, by the feminine rule of contrary, I suppose, the best wife he could have had under the circumstances. Where he was weak, she was strong; she threw herself into the breach, and with counsel and encouragement, and with an insight that marked her as a daughter of a race of rulers, endeavoured, so far as lay in her power, to beat back and outwit the foes who were hemming us in on every side. Upon one person only, and then always excepting on one memorable occasion, the peril in which we stood seemed to produce no outward effect. I allude to Count von Marquart, the man whose personality stands out in that terrible period, clear cut, impressive, and invariably heroic. The waves of discord might dash and break at his feet, the winds of hatred shriek about his devoted head, but, like a lighthouse in a storm, he stood immovable – a guiding light to the end.

Though we did not think so at the time, and flattered ourselves that everything would soon be set right, we were nearer the end than we supposed. It was on the sixteenth of December, a date engraved in letters of fire upon my brain, that the climax came. For several days the city had been in an uproar, crowds had paraded the streets, and had even clamoured at the palace gates. So violent did they at last become, that it was necessary that the military should be called out in order to disperse them. But – and it was here that the shoe pinched – it was unmistakably borne in upon those at the head of affairs, that the army itself was in sympathy with the rioters. For upwards of a week Max and I had not been permitted to leave the palace, the streets being considered unsafe for us at such a time. During the afternoon of the sixteenth a council meeting was held, after attending which the members had been compelled to disperse secretly, and by different doors, for fear the mob should get hold of them. By chance I happened to be near my mother's boudoir when von Marquart acquainted her with the result of their deliberations. They had never been friends, but at such a time they felt they must cease to be enemies.

"If you will give me warning when it will be necessary for us to start, I will take care to be ready," I heard my mother say, in answer to a speech of his.

"You may count upon me," Marquart replied gravely. "I will allow your Majesty as much time as possible."

Then, having kissed her hand, he withdrew without another word. When he had gone, my mother crossed to the window, and drawing back the curtain, looked out upon the snow-covered Platz. Presently a convulsive sob reached my ears. Proud woman though she was, in the face of this new trouble, her fortitude for the moment deserted her. I emerged from my hiding place and went over to her, slipping my hand into hers. Sinking down upon the window-seat she drew me to her and kissed me passionately.

"Paul, Paul, my little son," she cried, her voice breaking with tears, "this is my work. It is your mother who has brought about this ruin. And yet God knows I am innocent of any evil intention."

"Those who say that it is your fault lie, mother," I began, with an indignation that at any other time would have been ludicrous in one so young. "Max says it is a lie, and when he is king he will punish them. He told me this morning. Don't cry, mother dear; Max and I will take care of you."

The unintentional irony of my remark must have occurred to her, for she rose from her seat and walked a few paces away. How bitter her thoughts must have been at that moment! Her husband was alive, and yet her honour was to wait for vengeance until her sons should be come to man's estate. My little speech, spoken in all good faith, strikes me now as the most cruel indictment yet urged against my father's memory.

That night, when Max and I were in bed, I told him what I had heard and seen.

"Why doesn't our father order out the troops and shoot them down?" said bloodthirsty Max. "That was what Maximilian the Seventh did, and they left him in peace. If I were king I would show them no mercy."

It seemed to me a pity under these circumstances that Max was *not* upon the throne, for then by his own showing we should have nothing to fear, and should be able to go for our daily rides, instead of being shut up within the palace from morn till night. Then I fell asleep and remembered no more until I was awakened by hearing a stern voice ordering us to get up and dress as quickly as possible. I opened my eyes and to my surprise found the Count von Marquart standing beside my bed. What his presence there, and at such an hour, betokened, I could not for the life of me understand; but such was my respect for him, by day or night, that I did not hesitate to do as he bade me. Half asleep and half awake Max and I huddled on our garments, and, as soon as we were dressed, followed the Count down the stairs to one of the audience chambers leading out of the great hall. There we found my mother and father, dressed for going out. My favourite captain of the Guard, Baron Bathony, covered with snow, entered the vestibule as we crossed it. He shook himself like a great dog, and then, seeing von Marquart standing by the door, hastened towards him. That he had some bad news to report was plain to all of us. It was written on his face.

"Well, sir, what tidings do you bring?" asked von Marquart in a fierce whisper, that was as audible as his usual voice.

"The very worst," replied Bathony. "The citadel has fallen and the garrison has gone over to the Revolutionists. The enemy are even now marching in the direction of the palace. I have come to warn his Majesty."

"And his Majesty is infinitely obliged to you," said my father, who had approached unobserved. "The farce of kingship is played out, and now it is perhaps as well that we should ring the curtain down. What say you, Marquart?"

"I think it is time your Majesty considered the safety of your wife and children," answered the Prime Minister bluntly. "If you would save their lives it would be as well that you should leave the palace and start on your journey at once. There is no saying how soon the mob may be here, and then escape may be impossible."

On hearing this my mother rose from her chair. All traces of the agitation I had noticed earlier that evening had left her, and she was as calm and collected as ever I had seen her.

"We are quite ready," she said. "If your Majesty will give the necessary orders, there need be no further delay."

"So be it," remarked my father. Then turning to Max, who had been listening attentively to all that passed between them, he added, in his usual cynical fashion, "I had once hoped, my boy, to have had the pleasure of abdicating in your favour. It would appear that even kings may be mistaken. It is only the Sovereign people who are invariably right. Now, Marquart, if you are quite ready, let us bid the Capital good-bye."

With Bathony leading, my father and Max following close behind him, my mother and I, hand-in-hand, coming next, and Marquart bringing up the rear, we left the audience chamber and passed across the great hall, under the staring statues, many of which had looked down on at least three generations of our race, and which were destined to be hurled from their pedestals and smashed to atoms within a few hours of our departure. Then out by a side door into the walled-in space called the Guard's Parade, from the fact that on sunny mornings the band of the Household Regiment was wont to play there. On opening the door we were assailed by the cold blast, which, blowing across the snow, gave us a foretaste of what our journey would be like. The night was fine, and overhead the stars shone brilliantly. The glow of the city lights could be seen on every hand, while in the distance the low hum of the mob fell upon our ears like a wild beast roaring for its prey. This alone served to make us quicken our pace towards a gate on the opposite side of the courtyard, which Bathony unlocked, and which, when we had passed through it, he again secured behind him. Only once in my memory have I heard of a reigning family leaving their palace in so unostentatious a fashion.

Twenty yards or so from the gate, two carriages were drawn up. Towards the first of these Marquart hurried us. The other was for my mother's maid and my father's faithful valet, and also for our luggage, of which we could not carry very much. The leave-taking of the two men who had stood by us so faithfully was affecting in the extreme.

"Your Majesty knows the route that has been arranged?" began Marquart. "The men, I pledge myself, are trustworthy, but I should not delay at any place longer than is absolutely necessary for the business in hand. The rebellion is spreading through the country, and one scarcely knows upon whom to pin one's faith. For your children's and your Queen's sake, let me implore you to be careful!"

Even then, at this late hour in the tide of his affairs, my father could not resist a jibe at the other's expense.

"I must endeavour to remember your advice, Marquart," he said. "At first it is a little difficult to understand that one is out of leading strings. I suppose, however, I shall get used to being my own master in time."

To this speech Marquart offered no reply. Taking the hand my mother offered him, he bent over it and kissed it.

"Farewell, your Majesty," he said, "and when we next meet I pray it may be in happier times."

Then he took leave of my father and afterwards of Max and myself. Bathony followed suit, and then we entered the carriage and drove rapidly away.

Choosing deserted streets and avoiding every thoroughfare in which there was the remotest chance of our carriages being recognised, we eventually reached the outskirts of the city and took the high-road that leads across the mountains to the town of Aschenberg. So far, admirable success had accompanied us, but it was no sort of guarantee that such good fortune would continue. Hour after hour we rolled along the silent country roads, drawing gradually nearer the mountains, whose snow-clad peaks loomed dense as a wall against the starlit sky.

It had been arranged that we should spend what remained of that night and also the next day at the house of a distant kinsman of the Count von Marquart. On the second night we were to continue our journey, putting up at an inn in the mountains, and so on, as fast as horses could take us, and circumstances would permit, until we should have crossed the border and be in safety. The night was well spent before we reached the mountains, and it wanted only an hour or so to daybreak when we

began the climb up the last ascent that led to our refuge for the night. Already the first grey dawn was creeping across the landscape, showing the snow-covered slopes of the mountains on the one side, and the rock-strewn valley on the other, in all their dreary nakedness. Then we looked out of the carriage window and saw the castle itself, standing out on the bold side of the mountain, and commanding a view that is possibly without its equal in all Pannonia. The rusty old drawbridge – for this ancient place still possessed one – was lowered in readiness for our approach, and since the owner and his three stalwart sons were beside it on the look-out for our coming, it seemed as if our arrival were more anxiously awaited than we imagined. Glad as they were to see us, we were still more pleased to leave the carriage. For two of our number at least the journey must of necessity have been an agonising one. Yet no word of reproach had been spoken on either side.

"I offer your Majesties the heartiest welcome in my power," said our host, coming forward and bowing before my father and mother. "I would to God it were not under such circumstances."

"The fortune of war, my dear Count," replied my father. "Let us be thankful our enemies have allowed us even to live. I believe I am not the first of my House that your castle has sheltered in adverse days. If I am not mistaken my ancestor, Stephen Ramonyi, was its guest in 1553 when – but there, the present is sufficient for our needs, without raking up the troubles of the past, and it is rather cold here for such a discussion. Her Majesty and the children are tired after their long journey."

On hearing this the old man led the way across the great courtyard towards the flight of steps which led up to the main entrance of the castle. I cannot hope to make you understand how the dreariness of the place struck me, and what a chill it set upon my heart. Yet for the time being it meant safety, even life itself, for us.

The Countess received my mother on the steps, and then we passed into the castle together. A meal had been prepared for us, and as soon as we had discarded our wraps we sat down to it. What transpired further I do not know, for, quite worn out, I fell asleep in my chair before I had swallowed half a dozen mouthfuls. When I awoke again I was in bed, and the wind was whistling round the turret as if in mockery of our fallen fortunes.

Next evening, as soon as it was dark, we bade our friends farewell, and once more resumed our journey. It was necessary that, if possible, we should reach a lonely inn on the other side of the mountains before daylight, and the road, so we were informed, was by no means a good one. As we soon discovered, this proved a correct assertion; for a more discouraging thirty miles could scarcely have been found in the length and breadth of the country. In consequence, instead of arriving at our destination, as it was most important we should do, while it was still dark, it was full morning before we came in sight of it. If the castle of Elfrinstein had seemed a lonely spot, this, our second stopping place, was infinitely more so. The inn itself stood within a deep gorge, the rugged sides of which towered some hundreds of feet above its roof. The building was a mere hovel of four rooms, and at one time was much frequented by those engaged in smuggling spirits across the border.

When we drew up at the door, the landlord, an enormous man, possessing the reddest hair I have ever seen on a human being, and a beard that reached almost to his waist, emerged, rubbing his eyes and yawning cavernously. He was followed by a woman, his wife. Together they approached the carriage, and as soon as my father had alighted, knelt before him with bowed heads. The picture seemed so incongruous, so out of keeping with the other attributes of that grim place, that, miserable as we all were – for the previous night's journey had been comfort itself compared with that we had just completed. I don't think one of us was able to suppress a smile.

"Get up, my friends," said my father in a kindly tone, "and lead us into the house. We are worn out after our night's travelling. No one has been this way in search of us, I hope?"

"Not a living soul, your Majesty," the man replied. "They'd best not come about here now. 'Twould be a bad case for them if they found your Majesties here."

Having uttered this somewhat ambiguous speech, he led the way into the house, where, it was soon apparent, great preparations had been made for our reception.

It was early in the afternoon when a terrible incident, which came so near our undoing, occurred, and it happened in this way. Being determined that no one should approach the inn during the time we occupied it, our shock-headed friend had stationed one of his sons at the entrance of the defile, with definite instructions to bring the news to him with all speed should he detect the approach of any suspicious persons. For the greater portion of the day the lad saw no one; just when his brother arrived to relieve him, however, they espied approaching them, as rapidly as the rough nature of the ground would permit, a body of horsemen, who presently proved themselves to be soldiers. To rush back to the inn and give the alarm was the work of a few minutes.

"The soldiers! the soldiers!" cried the lads, bursting together into the room where their mother was busily engaged in preparing a last meal for us.

Their father rose to his feet.

"You know what to do, wife?" he said quietly, and then entered the room where we were sitting listening to the dreadful tidings.

"The soldiers are coming, your Majesty," he remarked, still quite unperturbed. "You must be away before they reach the house."

"But how is it to be done?" inquired my mother anxiously. "I see no way of escape, and there are the children to be thought of."

"When the little princes are ready, I'll show your Majesty a way, never fear," the man replied, and surely enough, as soon as our outdoor garments had been donned, he took me in his arms and led the way through the house to the back. The great blank wall of the cliff abutted close upon it, but how this was to help us I could not understand. At one place his eldest son was busily engaged removing a pile of brushwood, and making straight for this he put me down and began to assist the boy. When the stack had been partially removed, a circular hole in the cliff, about the size of a large barrel, became apparent.

"If your Majesties will follow me, I don't think the soldiers will catch you," he said, and forthwith went down upon all-fours. A moment later the King and Queen of Pannonia and their somewhat fastidious children might have been seen on their hands and knees, crawling into safety, if I may so express it, through a hole in the wall.

CHAPTER III

I have described the ignominious fashion in which our family, led by the giant innkeeper, made its way through the hole in the cliff, and thus escaped the soldiers, who otherwise would certainly have arrested us. As soon as Gabriel, my father's valet, who was the last of our party to enter, had disappeared, the innkeeper's son, who remained outside, once more covered the aperture with brushwood, thus effectually concealing its existence. Provided the soldiers did not become aware of our subterranean hiding-place as they were scarcely likely to do, we had every right to consider ourselves safe, at least for the time being.

Much to our relief the small tunnel through which it was necessary for us to crawl was only a few feet in length; for this reason we seemed scarcely to have entered it before our guide informed us that we might resume an upright position. He then struck a match, and its light enabled us to see that we were standing in a large cave, the walls of which streamed with moisture. Taking a torch, made of some resinous wood, from a small box covered with a sack, he fired it and turned to us again.

"It is for your Majesty to say what you will do now," he observed, addressing my father. "Do you prefer to wait until the soldiers have gone, and then return to the inn, or will you permit me to guide you across the mountains to the Border by a track which is difficult but safe, and which will shorten the distance by nearly one half? I await your Majesty's orders!"

The King turned to my mother as if for her opinion. Her mind was soon made up.

"Let us endeavour to reach the Border by all means," she answered. "There is nothing to be gained by returning to the inn, and there is always the risk of the soldiers finding us there. The sooner we are under the protection of King George, the better for us all."

"So be it," my father replied, with his usual equanimity. Then, turning to the innkeeper, he added, with what must have been a touch of his old sarcasm, "If it will not be troubling you too much to conduct us to the Border, we will do our best to follow you."

The man bowed, and having advised us to step carefully, led the way to the back of the cave. Hitherto it had looked as if we were standing in a chamber to which the tunnel was the only entrance. This was not the case, however. In the further corner, hidden by a projecting rock, was a narrow passage, perhaps seven feet high by three in width. Whether it had been cut by the hand of man, or whether it was the work of Nature, I cannot say. In either case it enabled us to escape from what promised to be a most embarrassing situation, for had the troops caught us, I tremble to think what our fate must have been. Enraged as the populace were by our departure from the Capital, and flushed with their recent triumphs, it is difficult to say to what extremes they might have resorted.

Leaving the cave, we climbed the narrow passage in single file, the landlord leading the way, Gabriel bringing up the rear. Sometimes in my dreams I climb that passage now, see the streaming walls, feel the rough stones under my feet, and hear my mother's voice bidding me step carefully. From what I can remember of it now, the path must have sloped upwards very gradually. It was long, and certainly difficult. As the innkeeper, with a desire for explanation that unconsciously attained a fine height in the realms of irony, confessed to my father afterwards, it had been used in bygone days by smugglers, who were in the habit of bringing their booty across the border by the self-same track we were to follow that night. Having reached the western slope of the mountains, they carried it down by the passage to the cave below, whence it was despatched to its destination by different hands. It is possible that our guide had himself participated in this amusement; if he had, however, he did not commit himself. Once on the road my father gave him a home thrust:

"You seem to know the road extremely well, my friend," he said. "Doubtless you have carried many a valuable cargo over it with your friends. I fancy, however, this must be the first time you have convoyed a king."

The man looked sheepish.

"Well, well," continued my father, noticing his confusion, "if you have defrauded the king, you have at least made up for it by giving him his life. Since the bargain would strike you as a fair one, we will cry quits."

It was noticeable, as we approached the end of the passage, that the incline was not so steep. Indeed, at the mouth it was almost level walking. A moment later the guide put out his torch by knocking it against the wall, and as he did so, the daylight poured in upon us. We had reached the end of our underground journey. Outside, the world was covered with snow, and the air that blew in through the passage was bitterly cold.

"Would your Majesties care to rest awhile, or shall we push on?" inquired the innkeeper, after he had inspected the sky.

"Let us go on by all means," my mother replied. "How far shall we have to travel to reach the Border?"

"Fully thirty miles," the man answered. "It is about twenty from here as the crow flies. There is a hut half-way in which we can spend the night. If we are to reach it before dark, however, we must step out."

We accordingly rose and prepared for our long tramp. It was a terrible undertaking for most of our party. My mother and her maid were by no means strong; my father had lived a recluse's life for so many years that he was ill-fitted for so much exertion; Max and I were children, while Gabriel was a man who had led a decidedly easy life, and was by no means accustomed to outdoor exercise. Our minds having been made up for us by our mother, we left the passage and set out. The mountains, covered with their white mantle, looked very beautiful, but the silence was awesome in the extreme. Not a sound save the crunching of the snow under our feet fell upon the ear. All things considered, it was far from being a joyous procession. The remembrance of what we had before us, and the recollection of what we had already passed through, weighed upon us like lead. As a matter of fact, we had not proceeded more than a mile before I was quite exhausted. Seeing this, the innkeeper waited until I approached him, then took me up and carried me, sometimes in his arms, sometimes on his shoulder, for the remainder of the journey.

The sun had fallen and day was drawing to its close when we saw ahead of us the hut in which we were destined to spend the night. It was a tiny place, built of wood, and of the roughest possible description. Poor as it was, however, our hearts were gladdened by the sight of it, and on its appearance the others unconsciously hastened their steps. With the approach of night the cold had increased a hundredfold, and a heavy fall of snow seemed imminent. My mother and her maid could scarcely draw their feet along, and the remainder of our party were in almost as bad a case. For my own part, I believe I must have fallen asleep in our guide's arms, for I have but the faintest recollection of what occurred during the latter portion of the march. But we reached the hut at last, and, for the time being at least, were able to consider our troubles at an end. In such a place we were scarcely likely to be disturbed. Unfastening the door of the hut, the man threw it open and invited us to enter.

I am often tempted to wonder whether in the history of the Nineteenth Century, when it comes to be written, it will be possible to find a parallel in the record of any single royal family for that strange evening's lodgings. For my own part, I know that whenever my mother's description of it occurs to me, I am compelled to a feeling of wonderment that she should not only be able to recall it with so much equanimity, but that she should have come through it at all. As I have said, dusk had fallen before we reached the hut.

As we entered it and closed the door behind us, the wind rose, and a long gust whistled drearily round the building as if loth to let us escape so easily. The snow was piled high against the walls, so that at a distance the hut must have resembled a white heap rather than a human dwelling. Fortunately for our comfort, however, the last occupant of the hut had accumulated a good supply of fuel, and this being so it was not long before the innkeeper and Gabriel had a large fire blazing on the hearth. Provisions were next obtained from some mysterious hiding-place, and then might have been seen,

had there been any stranger there to witness it, the curious spectacle of the King and Queen of Pannonia, their children, and their faithful adherents, sitting before the cheerful blaze munching black bread with its accompaniment of goat's milk cheese. After that I must have become drowsy, for I remember resting my head upon my mother's arm, watching the sparks hop from the logs, and listening to the moaning of the wind outside.

I can recollect nothing else, however, until I was awakened by a loud knocking at the door. "Who can it be?" was the question that each one asked of him or her self. Had the soldiers discovered our whereabouts? Were we destined to be captured after all? My father, who had his place on the further side of the hearth, had risen, and was watching the innkeeper, who had approached the door, while my mother placed her arm round me as if she were prepared to protect me to the last gasp. Once more the knocking sounded, and the innkeeper turned to my father for instructions.

"Open it," said the latter with a nod. "If they want us they must have us, so we may as well make a virtue of necessity."

The other obeyed, and a moment later a blast of cold air entered, bringing with it a quantity of snow that melted as soon as it touched the floor. Outside, within the range of firelight, stood three men, each of whom, it was to be observed, carried upon his back a pack of curious shape. That they were not soldiers was happily apparent. The luck which had stood by us so far was once more triumphant. The innkeeper must have recognised the new arrivals, for, uttering a cry of surprise, he threw his cloak round his shoulders and went out to them, closing the door behind him. He was absent some ten minutes. When he returned he approached my father and informed him, with a candour quite in keeping with his character, that the men were three of the band of smugglers of whom he had spoken to us that afternoon. The hut was their property, and it was they who kept it stocked and provisioned.

"But the point is what they intend doing with us?" said my father. "Surely they do not wish to turn us out? And there seems scarcely room for us all."

"They have no thought of turning your Majesties out," the other replied. "All they desire is to be permitted to share the hut with you to-night. They have come far to-day and are weary."

"If that is all, let them enter by all means. It would be hard indeed if we were to keep them out of their rightful property." Then turning to my mother, he continued, "It is only consistent with the topsy-turvey state of things at present existing, that a king and those who are defrauding him of his revenues should spend the night together. I wonder what von Marquart would say if he could see us now?"

He had scarcely finished speaking before the three men, whose arrival had caused us so much anxiety, entered the hut, the last of the three closing the door carefully behind him. Needless to say we eyed them critically. And indeed they were a singular trio. Two were enormous men, so tall indeed that, when they stood upright, their heads came within a few inches of the roof. The third, the leader and their spokesman, was built on different lines; in other words, he was as small as his companions were large; as talkative as they were taciturn. He was the possessor of an enormous head, which was quite out of proportion to his body; and his face, which was without hirsute adornment of any sort or description, derived an added comicality from the fact that his left eye was partially closed, giving it the appearance of a perpetual wink. When they had deposited their burdens in a corner of the hut, they turned and saluted my father and mother.

"Welcome, my friends," said my father, who could be graciousness itself when he pleased. "You have chosen a rough night for travelling. Approach the fire and warm yourselves."

In response to his invitation, the men drew a step or two nearer the blaze, but no persuasion could induce them to come further. Their leader had not given them the signal, and they were not accustomed to act on their own initiative. Consequently, they took up their positions on blocks of wood at the back of the hut, and sitting there stared at us with a solemnity that at any other time would have been laughable in the extreme. It was in vain that my father sought to lure them into

conversation. They answered him, it is true, but in so few words as possible. They had been engaged in this illicit traffic all their lives, and, as they protested, and we could believe, made but little out of it. The risks were great, the hardships never ceasing, dangers surrounded them on every hand, and yet they braved them for a reward which they could have doubled had they confined their energies to the humbler tranquility of trade. They were brothers, and their father had been in the business before them, a fact which they regarded as a good and sufficient reason that they should continue the enterprise after he had ceased to participate in it.

Suddenly the small man turned and whispered something to his companion. The idea, whatever it was, seemed to give him considerable satisfaction, for he nodded his head approvingly. Still true to his *rôle* of leader, the smaller rose and went to the corner where their illicit merchandise was stored. Having broached one of the kegs he poured from it a cup of spirit for the refreshment of the party. It was offered first to my mother, who refused it. Then to my father, who took a sip and passed it on; the others drinking in their turn. From that moment matters improved a little, and a desultory conversation followed, my father and the little man doing most of the talking, the others throwing in occasional remarks, like the firing of minute guns at sea. Thus the night wore on.

At length the pauses in the conversation grew longer and more frequent. The sound of breathing resounded through the hut, until only my mother remained awake, thinking her own thoughts, which, it may be supposed, were far from being of the most pleasant description. Poor Queen, though she lived for many years after our flight, she never fully recovered from the shock of that dreadful time. The recollection of those days remained a nightmare to her until the end, and it may be remembered that in her last delirium she fancied herself back in the hut with her children crouching by her side.

As soon as it was light next morning we ate a hasty meal, and then prepared to continue our journey. It was a white world that we looked upon when we opened the door. Fortunately, snow was no longer falling, but it had been doing so all night, and every sign of the path by which we had approached the hut had entirely disappeared. A consultation had taken place earlier between the innkeeper and the smugglers, the result of which was an offer on their part to assist in the work of conducting us to the frontier, which, needless to say, was only too gladly accepted. Accordingly, as soon as day was sufficiently advanced, we bade the hut good-bye and set out on the last stage of our momentous journey. A strong breeze was still blowing across the snow, and, as we were soon to discover, it cut like a knife. When we had decided upon the route, the little man went on ahead, in order, so he explained, to spy out the country, and to make sure that we did not fall into a trap. As on the previous afternoon, the big innkeeper carried me, and one of the smugglers did the same at intervals for Max, while the other helped my mother and her woman whenever the path became more difficult than usual. It was perhaps as well that we had their assistance, for, as we soon found, the road we were following, if road it can be called, was far from being an easy one. For the first few miles it lay along the mountain side, then by a long and gradual descent to the valley below. For the women of our party it proved even more trying than that of the previous day, but, with the assistance of the guides, it was in the end safely accomplished, and we stood upon the plain, only a matter of ten or a dozen miles from safety. Even that short distance, however, contained a sufficiency of dangers. On one occasion we were within an ace of stumbling upon a camp of gipsies, on another we discovered that we were being followed by three men, whose intentions could scarcely have been conducive to the end we had in view. It was within half a mile of the Border, however, and just when we were beginning to deem ourselves safe, that we received the greatest shock. We had left the fields behind us and had entered a small wood, when the little man, who, as usual, was leading the way, suddenly stopped, and held up his hand to the others not to advance. Then he crept forward to discover, if possible, of what the danger consisted. He was absent for upwards of five minutes, and when he returned it was with a solemn face.

"Soldiers!" he whispered; "they are resting on the far side of the wood."

"There are at least a dozen of them," he replied in answer to a question of my father's. "They are eating a meal. They have not unsaddled, so that they will go on when they have rested."

Comforting as this last assurance was, we dared not place too much reliance on it. If the men were really searching for us, as we felt sure they were, it was more than likely that they would make an examination of the wood before leaving it. In that case we could scarcely fail to be captured. My father pointed this out to the innkeeper, who he still regarded as the leader of the party.

"We must hope for the best, your Majesty," that stalwart individual replied. "They have not caught us yet."

I can recall the whole scene now – the white trees, the snow-covered ground, and the anxious faces of our party, as we clustered together in the most sheltered spot we could find. While we were deliberating, snow once more began to fall in heavy flakes. It was the only touch that was wanting to complete our misery, and I heard my mother give a heavy sigh as if her endurance were giving way under the strain placed upon it.

"Go back again," said my father to the little man, "and watch them closely. As soon as they have finished their meal and you are in a position to divine their intentions, return and tell us, in order that we may know how to act."

The man slipped away in the same noiseless fashion as before, and once more we settled ourselves down to wait. The snow was falling thicker and faster every minute, and before the man had been absent ten minutes his footmarks were completely hidden. Of all the trials to which we were subjected during those three terrible days, I fancy that time of waiting was the worst. We were cold, tired, hungry, and in immediate danger. Small wonder, therefore, that everything seemed hopeless to us. Years afterwards, when I spoke of it to my mother, she confessed that, at the time, she did not expect to cross the Border alive. Hitherto, she had borne up as bravely as any woman could do; now, however, her fortitude gave way. To me it was all one long bewilderment. Accustomed as I was to be treated as a king's son, used to all the luxuries that rank and wealth could bestow, I could only imperfectly realise the change in our position. The guard turned out and saluted me when I entered the palace gates, my name was even associated with one of the crack regiments – Prince Paul's Own Hussars. How was it then, I asked myself, that the self-same troops were engaged in hunting instead of protecting us? It was a riddle I could not answer, try how I would, and my mother's explanation, that it was because they hated her, served to intensify rather than to dispel my bewilderment. I was about to interrogate Max, on whose wisdom I was accustomed to rely, on the subject, when we were suddenly called to action. Running as fast as his short legs could carry him, the little man burst upon our group with the alarming intelligence that the soldiers were about to search the wood. Though we had been expecting it, and were even waiting for it, the news came upon us like a thunder clap.

"What can we do to escape them?" cried my mother, wringing her hands in an agony of terror. Then turning to my father she continued: "Whatever happens they must not take the children. Save them at any hazard."

Even in that moment of danger she gave no thought to herself. It will always remain my firm conviction that she would have yielded up her own life joyfully, if by so doing she could have been sure of saving ours.

"There is nothing for it but for us to hide in the trees and take our chance," began my father, for once coming forward with a suggestion. "If we are perfectly quiet and the snow covers our tracks, it is just possible that they may not become aware of our presence."

In order that you may understand the value of the idea, it should be explained that the trees of which the wood was composed were a species of pine – I cannot recall their botanical name – with long, low branches that stretched out and touched the ground on every side. It was within the bounds of possibility that if we scrambled in among the snow-laden boughs and crouched down, our presence might not be observed, but it was a very slender chance upon which to trust our lives. However, within a few seconds of the man's sounding the alarm, we were all stowed away out of

sight. I scrambled into a tree with my mother and Max; my father, Gabriel, and my mother's woman were hidden in another; while the remainder of the party distributed themselves as best they could. Then followed another interval of suspense, during which we expected to hear every moment the tramp of the soldiers' chargers on the snow, and to find a lance come driving into the tree to turn us out. With anxious eyes we watched the tell-tale footmarks on the ground, knowing that upon them our lives depended. Heaven be thanked, however, the snow was falling fast, and every second's delay meant a greater chance of safety. A quarter of an hour went by and still the troopers did not come. The delay was difficult to account for. Had the man made a mistake when he had said that he had seen them preparing to search the wood? I had turned my face up to my mother's and was about to address a remark to her on the subject, when a look of terror flashed into her face, and she had clapped her hand upon my mouth to prevent me from speaking. It was well that she did, for, looking through the branches, I saw coming towards us, and not a dozen paces distant, a stalwart cavalryman, mounted upon a bay horse. He was covered by a heavy cloak and had a bundle of hay tied behind his saddle. As he rode toward the tree in which we lay hidden, he hummed a song, the words of which we could plainly distinguish. That he noticed nothing unusual about the ground, and that he was not troubling himself very much on our account, was as plain as his appearance there. At any rate, he passed us without becoming aware how close we were to him. A moment later we heard him call to his companion to know if he had discovered anything.

"I've got the ague, I believe," the other answered. "That's all I've found. I wish his Majesty had discovered it instead of me."

"He's worse off than you are, I'll be bound," returned the first speaker with a considerable amount of truth. "For my part, I wouldn't change places with him."

Then the voice of the officer in command interrupted them. Five minutes later they had left the wood and were on their way along the road upon the other side. We were saved! But it was some time before we recovered from our fright.

An hour later we crossed the Border, and in less than two hours we had placed ourselves under the protection of King George of Gota. Our leave-taking of the brave innkeeper and his equally brave friends the smugglers was of an affecting description. For once my father dropped his cynicism and spoke his mind direct. My mother added her thanks to his, and distributed her rings among the men in token of the gratitude she felt for the service they had rendered us. If we had no other friends in Pannonia we had at least four upon whom we knew we might depend.

CHAPTER IV

At the end of the previous chapter I described our arrival in the kingdom of Gota, and the farewell we took of the men who had risked so much to bring about our safe arrival there. As it transpired, we arrived only just in time, for two days later my mother was taken seriously ill, and for upwards of a month lay at death's door. During that time the news we received from Pannonia was far from being satisfactory. The Prime Minister, the Count von Marquart, who still remained staunch to my father, had done his best to reduce the country's affairs to something like order, but his efforts were in vain. In consequence he was compelled to beat a hasty retreat to his country seat, and to leave it to its own devices. Trading on the popularity he believed himself to enjoy, the Prince of Lilienhöhe returned from exile, and, assisted by certain notorious enemies of the Ramonyi dynasty, made a vigorous attempt to seize the throne. He also was disappointed in his endeavour, for the country would have neither a Lilienhöhe nor a Ramonyi. What it wanted was a Republic of the French and American description, and a Republic, in hot haste, it was determined to have. As a result the Prince followed our example and crossed the Border with as much despatch as possible.

As soon as my mother was convalescent, it became necessary to arrive at some sort of an understanding as to what our future was to be. To return to our own country was out of the question; for many reasons, too numerous to mention, it was impossible for us to remain in Gota; while the neighbouring kingdoms were equally unsafe. It was King George himself, our host, who solved the problem for us. As a result my tenth birthday found us on English soil. Nowhere else in Europe could we hope to be so safe, and the affection I feel for that country may be said to have originated at the moment we set foot upon her shores. We were welcomed by the country at large, while, with thoughtful generosity, a royal residence was placed at our disposal until we should be in a position to find one for ourselves. This done, however, we settled down to the enjoyment of a quiet country life, and to wait until the course of events should make it possible for us to return to Pannonia once more. The change in our affairs proved exactly to my father's taste. He was no longer worried with the cares and responsibilities of kingship, but was able to give himself up entirely to the studies he so ardently loved. In my own heart I believe that, during the period of years that elapsed before his death, he had but one real fear, and that was the dread lest affairs should right themselves in Pannonia and he be called upon to resume his old life. With my mother it was altogether different. Where he rejoiced at his new-found liberty, she chafed and worried about the change in our lives. She could not forget that she was a king's wife and a king's daughter, and that in England we were exiles, turned out of our country and defrauded of our just rights. Where he scarcely spoke of his old life, and took but small interest in the country of his birth, she was invariably well informed as to all that occurred. She was fighting for her children's rights, and declared that she could never rest, or know any peace of mind, until we had come to our own again. Alas! for her happiness, poor soul, she did not live to see that day.

To Max and myself, accustomed as we were to the excitement of a Court, the new life came as a decided, and by no means welcome, change.

It was not long, however, before we became reconciled to it, and by the time we had been a year in England we could not only speak the language fluently, but were to all appearances veritable sons of the soil. It was a quiet life we led, but not an aimless one. The best of tutors were engaged for us, and the smallest detail of our studies was attended to by my mother with scrupulous exactness. We learnt to play cricket and football, to fence and box like English boys; and in order that our military education should not be neglected, it was decided that as soon as we were old enough, Max and I should enter the British Army, for which my mother entertained the greatest admiration. "The training," she was accustomed to say, "will prove of the greatest value to them when they return to Pannonia," and that seemed to settle it. Strangely enough, however, Max did not hail the arrangement with the delight that she had expected him to show. For some reason, as he grew up, his disposition

seemed to change. He, who was at first a headstrong, impulsive boy, was developing into a silent and almost taciturn young man. The notion that he would not succeed to the throne of his ancestors, which he had conceived as a boy, now returned to him with renewed force. It grew with him and thrived upon the thoughts that fostered it. One little incident will be sufficient to show the hold this strange idea had upon him. He was nineteen at the time; I was scarcely sixteen. In appearance he was a tall, fine-looking young fellow, with clean-cut features, dark resolute eyes, and black hair, that he wore in a somewhat foreign fashion. While he was, to all intents and purposes, a man, I was still a boy, fairly well grown it is true, perhaps somewhat advanced for my years, but in many respects as inferior to Max as a child of six is to a lad of twelve.

"My dear," said my father, one morning, addressing my mother, when we sat at breakfast, which, *en passant*, we took together in the homely English fashion, "I have received a letter that you will doubtless consider of some importance. The Count von Marquart is in England, and, with your permission, will pay us a visit to-day. May I instruct Beckerstein to telegraph to the effect that you will receive him?"

A look of pleasure came into my mother's face. What did Marquart's presence in England mean? Did it foretell a change in our lives? She hastened to assure my father that it would give her the utmost pleasure to see the old Minister who had served our House so faithfully. I thought of the Chancellor as I had last seen him, bending over my mother's hand as he bade her good-bye in the street beyond the palace, that terrible night on which we had fled from the Capital, and informed her in answer to her question that I remembered him perfectly. Strangely enough the enthusiasm which took possession of my mother and myself did not extend to my father and Max. The former, I am inclined to think, dreaded lest the Count's presence meant the commencement of an intrigue, which would eventually land him in Pannonia; but Max's reception of the news I am altogether at a loss to understand. The fact, however, remained, that the Count was in England, and that in a few hours we should see him once more.

For the remainder of the time that elapsed before he could be with us, my mother was filled with the greatest impatience. Never before had she been so well disposed towards the old man.

At last his carriage was seen rolling up the drive. Contrary to custom, and, perhaps, to etiquette, we had assembled on the terrace before the house, to await his arrival. Gradually the carriage drew nearer, and at last it pulled up at the steps. When the servants had opened the door, the figure of the aged statesman appeared, and ascended to where we were standing waiting to receive him. The time that had elapsed since we had last seen him had not played such havoc with him as we had expected. His back was still as straight, his glance as piercing; his moustache and hair may have been a little whiter, but it curled as fiercely as before. His age must have bordered close upon eighty, but his intellect was as keen as in his prime. He saluted my father and mother; then turned to Max. I saw his eyes wander over him with evident approval, taking in and appreciating the details of his appearance. "Here," doubtless he was saying to himself, "is a man worthy to be called king." Then he turned to me and took my hand. Immediately his expression changed and a look of bewilderment spread over his face. "Good Heavens! Michael's cross!" I heard him mutter to himself, and I could not have been mistaken, for the others of the party heard it also.

An awkward pause followed, during which I thought of that interview with the gipsy so many years before. Perhaps Max was thinking of it also, for his face grew very hard, and I knew by experience that he was battling with the temper that was trying to get possession of him. Nothing was said on the subject, however, and when Marquart had recovered his self-possession (why he should have lost it I cannot say) we followed our elders into the house. Though he endeavoured not to show it, I am inclined to believe that my father was more touched by his old Minister's visit than he would have liked us to suppose. At any rate, he forebore to indulge in his usual fits of cynicism. Though at dinner that evening he did not once refer to Pannonia, I feel certain a large portion of his thoughts were with her. Indeed, all things considered, it could scarcely have been otherwise. Since the establishment of

the Republic, the old Chancellor had held aloof from public affairs. Nothing would induce him to take any part in the new state of things. "They have mounted their horse of folly," he had observed when he had been approached on the subject, "let them ride it to death. I, for one, will not attempt to stop them." With that he had retired to his castle at Friedelbain, and had sat himself down to work out his Logarithms and to wait for the old order to reassert itself. This he confidently believed would some day come to pass.

After dinner, my father and Marquart withdrew to the former's study, while Max and I joined our mother in the drawing-room. Her lady-in-waiting, for though we were in exile we still preserved the semblance of a Court, was reading to her; but when we entered, at a signal from my mother, she stopped and put away her book. It was easily seen that the former had been upset by something, for, when we spoke to her, her thoughts seemed far away, and she answered with a hesitation that was by no means usual to her. Another thing struck me as remarkable, and that was her treatment of Max. They had not quarrelled; indeed, I had never known them to do such a thing, and yet her behaviour towards him seemed based on something that I could not for the life of me understand. It was as if she were trying to make up to him for an unintentional wrong that she had done him, and which she feared he might not forgive when he discovered. To add further to this strange state of affairs, the more amiable she was towards him the more ill at ease did he become with her. He seemed restless, discontented, and yet particularly anxious to be on friendly terms with myself, the one person of all others, after what had happened that afternoon, whom he might have been forgiven had he ignored. I could not understand it all, and the more I thought of it the more it troubled me. Surely Max did not imagine that I deemed it likely I should ever ascend the throne! I could not believe that he would be so foolish as to attach any credence to the old superstition concerning the Michael cross, or that even if he did, he would be weak enough to allow it to embitter his life.

If I live to be a hundred I shall not forget that evening, every detail connected with which, as I have shown, is engraved upon my memory. It was considerably after ten o'clock before my father and Marquart joined us in the drawing-room. The former seemed in excellent spirits, the latter scarcely so happy. Doubtless he had come expecting to find his old master pining to be back in his own country once more. His shrewd common sense, however, must have shown him, before they had been very long together, that this was far from being the case. He found him contented with his lot, and far from desirous of again taking up the load of responsibility he had been so fortunate as to cast off. Knowing nothing of the strained state of affairs that had existed prior to their entrance, Marquart must not be blamed if he unwittingly intensified the unpleasantness of the situation. He seated himself by the side of my mother, and talked with her of bygone days, and of friends of whom she had long lost sight, thus raising a train of thoughts in her mind that could only give birth to hopes she must have felt in her heart would never now be realised. It was noticeable also that the Count's eyes wandered continually in my direction. In consequence, I did not appear at my best. Knowing that Max was watching me, and that my mother was nervous on his account, I would have given anything to have been able to slip quietly from the room, and not make my appearance in public again until Marquart had left the house. This, however, was out of the question. The Count was our guest, and it behoved me to remain with him. How thankful, therefore, I was when the time arrived for us to say good-night, I must leave you to imagine. In silence Max and I made our way to our own quarter of the house. I wanted to say something to him, and yet I did not know with what words to approach him. I remembered the look I had seen on his face that afternoon, and dreaded lest an explosion were imminent. Such, however, was not the case. Having reached my bedroom, we paused to bid each other good-night. Then Max put his hand on my shoulder and looked sadly down at me. There was an expression upon his face that I had never seen there before. It told me that he had battled with himself, and that, after a severe struggle, his better nature had come out triumphant.

"Poor old Paul!" he said in a kindlier tone than I think he had ever yet spoken to me. "Come what may, we will be friends. Whatever the future may have in store for us, we will not quarrel, will we? Shall we swear to that?"

"Of course we will be friends, Max," I answered. "We'll never be anything else, happen what may. Why should we?"

He did not answer my question, but shook me by the hand, and then, with a little sigh, turned and went along the corridor to his own room, while I went into mine, vainly trying to arrive at an understanding of the situation. One thing, at any rate, was certain: Max and I had agreed not to quarrel. Yet instinctively I felt that it had cost him something to speak to me as he had done. Poor Max! Poor Max! I have known many men, but few with such honest hearts as yours.

A few minutes later I was in bed, but, as I soon discovered, not to sleep. The stirring events of the day had exercised a greater effect upon my brain than I had imagined. My interview with Max was still too fresh in my memory to permit of my settling down to slumber. My heart was upbraiding me for not having met his advances with a greater show of warmth. While he had been all generosity to me, it struck me that I had been almost cold to him. How devoutly I wished that Marquart had never come to England at all! Unconsciously, it is true, he had done his best to estrange my brother and myself; he had put all sorts of thoughts in my mother's head that had better not have been there, and for what purpose? For the life of me I could not tell. What a strange world it is, after all, and what blind bats we mortals may consider ourselves! While I was fretting and worrying because Max was unhappy, Destiny was slowly moving forward her chessmen, in the ranks of which we none of us knew what parts we were to play. Looking back at that time, I am struck by two strange facts. If my mother could see sufficiently far into the future to entertain vague fears upon Max's account, and the latter, forewarned by fate, perhaps, thought it necessary to make me swear that we should ever remain friends, how was it that they could not see further? Had they done so, Max would have – but there, we could not see, so what more remains to be said? Let me return, therefore, to the point at which I broke off.

I had retired to rest for upwards of an hour when I caught the sound of a door being shut further along the corridor, and a moment later of a soft footfall outside my room. I wondered who it could be, for there was no room save Max's and my own in that quarter of the house, and I did not know of any one who would be likely to visit it. As I listened, the footfalls were accompanied by something that was very like a sob. I could restrain my curiosity no longer, but, springing from my bed, opened the door and looked out. A figure was making its way towards the main portion of the house, and one glance was sufficient to show me that it was my mother. She had been to Max's room, and was returning to her own, weeping bitterly. Had there been the remotest chance of my catching her, I should have run after her and attempted to comfort her, but I was too late. Feeling as if I were the cause of her unhappiness, I returned to bed, and once more set to work to try and unravel the mystery that surrounded us. Had I been able to guess what the future had in store for us, I might have been able to set it right. I wonder if I should have had the pluck to do so? In my own heart I like to think it possible.

CHAPTER V

In course of time and in accordance with the parental plans, Max had joined a regiment, the 123rd Lancers, and was quartered in the Midlands, while I was to embark upon my quest for military distinction as soon as I should be old enough for a commission. Eventually I was gazetted to a lieutenancy in Her Majesty's Household Cavalry. This necessitated my living in town; a distinct change from the quiet country life I had hitherto led. I was fortunate in being kindly received by my brother officers, and as my father and mother's friends went out of their way to show me attention, it may be taken for granted that I was about as satisfied with my lot in life as a man could well be. Pannonia seemed slipping every day further into the background, and there were even times when I was scarcely conscious of her existence. Strangely enough, my mother, upon whom time was steadily laying her hand, seemed to be abandoning the notion that we should return, and to be resigning herself to the idea that England was likely to be her home for the remainder of her existence. And that leads me to venture upon a little piece of moralising, the first and last, I trust, I shall indulge in.

We are led to believe by the doctors that once in every seven years our physical being undergoes a change. Might this not be so in other matters? Be that as it may, there is certainly a strange concurrence in numbers. I was eight years old when the gipsy woman told me my fortune, and brought about the first trouble between Max and myself; I was sixteen when von Marquart made his appearance in England, and marked another epoch in my life; and if the line of coincidence may be followed further, I might also observe that I was twenty-four when the third, and, perhaps in a certain sense, the most important event occurred, for the reason that from it so many other issues were developed. At the same time I must confess it is not a subject upon which I care to dwell for any length of time. It has both a pleasant and painful side, and while I am willing to state that it has proved my greatest blessing, I am also bound to admit that it has inflicted upon me a wound, the scar of which time will never be able to obliterate. And this brings me to another argument. Surely it must have struck you how often the greatest events find their origin in the simplest things. I will supply an instance. John Noakes, a village mechanic, drops in one Sunday afternoon, having nothing better to do, to take a cup of tea with Matthew Stoakes, whose daughter Jane, by the way, boasts a pretty face and a comely figure. Hitherto, John has never thought of sweethearting, or indeed of anything else but his carpenter's bench, and his bit of garden behind the cottage. Somehow this afternoon, however, he feels impelled towards his neighbour's house. He goes; old Matthew, to while away the time, reads to the assembled company a letter he has received from a brother in Australia. Though the writer himself would not appear to have done as well as he could have wished, he describes, with fine descriptive touches, the wealth other men have accumulated in that Eldorado of the South. John goes home with a notion at the back of his head that he too would like to try his luck there. The idea grows and flourishes. Eventually he sets sail for the Antipodes, and for upwards of thirty years nothing more is heard of him. When he returns to England after this long lapse of time he is several times a millionaire, and in a position to purchase half the country-side, which he promptly does. He plumes himself upon his shrewdness, and talks of his business capacity to his fellow-justices! He quite forgets, however, that, had it not been for that chance visit to old Matthew's house that sunny Sunday afternoon, and the letter that was read to him there, he might still be planing at his bench, a poorer and, in every respect, a humbler man. And so, gentle reader, I venture to suggest, it is with all of us. However we may be born, whatever may come to us from other people, there is always one little chance permitted us, and according as we seize it or neglect it, so it will make or mar our lives. Mine came to me in a quite unexpected fashion, and I must leave you to discover for yourselves in what manner I treated it, and what befell me and mine in consequence.

It has been popularly supposed that Her Majesty's Household Troops have no other occupation in life than to act as escorts to Royal carriages, to take part in public processions, and to sit like statues

upon their chargers, in the pigeon-houses that ornament the front of the Horse Guards. A certain popular novelist has gone further, and has accused their officers of being as luxuriously housed as young duchesses, of breaking the hearts of beautiful ladies-in-waiting, and of committing various other petty sins, very charming no doubt in themselves, but much too improper for me to mention here. However that may be, I am prepared to state that my military duties were of a somewhat more arduous nature. Relaxations there were, it is true, and of the most pleasant description; and he would have been hard indeed to satisfy who could have been discontented with them. Nevertheless, the fact remains that our lives were not so easy as many people are wont to declare.

Despite a certain witty diplomatist's assertion that Paris is pre-eminently "the city of pretty women, while London is that of immaculate wives," I am prepared to contend that never in any other part of Europe have I seen so many beautiful women gathered together at one time as in the foggy metropolis of England. At the risk of being considered conceited, I must admit their kindness to myself. A heart less susceptible to their fascinations could not have failed to have been broken a dozen times in each successive season. As for me, I gave in at once without a struggle, and did not utter even a cry for mercy.

"It's a good thing for you that your position protects you," said one of our majors one afternoon as we drove home together from Hurlingham. "Had it been otherwise, you would have been caught long since."

A certain young unmarried American had been present that afternoon, and I am not going to say that there had not been some excuse for his admonition. At the same time I would not admit that he was right. To have done so would have been to deprive myself of a considerable amount of pleasure in the future.

"My dear fellow," I answered, "when Providence vouchsafes one such opportunities, it would be scarcely respectable on a mere mortal's part to neglect them. Miss Gedge was kind enough this afternoon to tell me that she '*just fairly adored princes*,' and after an invitation of that description what could one do but make oneself as agreeable as possible? Put yourself in my place and see what you would do!"

"Not if I know it," he replied. "I would not run such a risk for the world."

Favoured though I had been, I was happy enough, so far, not to have been smitten by the Bow Boy's dart, and with this little explanation I will proceed to narrate the incident to which it is the prelude.

The week in question had been an exceptionally busy one. We had had a field day at Wormwood Scrubs on Monday, a regimental polo match at Hurlingham on Tuesday, a mess dinner given to the Hereditary Prince of Liedenvald on Wednesday, while on Thursday there was a garden party at Marlborough House, a state dinner at Buckingham Palace, and dances at no less than four houses afterwards. When I opened my eyes in the morning, it was with the feeling that I had a vast amount of work to get through before I should be able to close them again. How little I imagined the variety of emotions to which I was to be subjected before that event could take place! That afternoon, at the last moment, I was detained at the barracks for some little time; in consequence, it was considerably past four o'clock before I entered the gates of Marlborough House. Having paid my respects to the most charming hostess in England, if not in the world, I crossed the lawn in search of acquaintances. Seated under a tree I discovered my kind friend the Duchess of Laverstock. She was talking to the Russian Ambassador at the moment, but was kind enough to receive me very graciously.

The good fairy at her birth had bestowed upon Her Grace the rare gift – and, believe me, it is a rare one – of being able to make the person to whom she was speaking think that the amusement of the moment would be like leather and prunella to her, but for his, or her, participation in it.

"You are late, Prince Paul," she said, moving her parasol a little, in order to shade her face. "I have been expecting you for the last half-hour."

"Am I to be flattered by your interest or grieved at your disappointment?" I replied, seating myself beside her. "Perhaps you will decide for me. In any case, could you not induce the Duke to bring in a Bill to ameliorate the condition of lieutenants in Her Majesty's Household Cavalry? Think how they have worked us this week. It will take at least three months' leave to put me on my feet again."

The Duchess laughed good-humouredly.

"You must dine with us and give him your ideas on the subject," she said. "In the meantime I am going to talk seriously to you. I have brought a young friend with me to-day to whom you must really be introduced."

"Who is this friend you are so anxious I should meet? You have aroused my curiosity."

"Is it really in my power to do that?" she retorted. "You have at last paid me a compliment I can appreciate. But let us walk across the lawn; I fancy we shall find her at the further end. I saw her a few minutes since walking with Lord Newmarket."

"I only hope he has not been regaling her with any of his sporting reminiscences. It was Mary Bethbridge, I think, who declared that, when she was staying at Markingdale, even the wording of the family prayers reeked of the stables."

Talking in this strain, the amiable lady led me across the lawn towards a group of people who were clustered near the band. She was on the look-out for her friend, but who that friend was I am prepared to admit I had not the slightest idea. As all the world is, or should be, aware, the Duchess of Laverstock is an inveterate matchmaker. It is said that, at their place in Devonshire, she allows such of her farm servants as are bachelors a month to choose a sweetheart, six months to court in, a week to propose in, another month in which to marry, and – well, the long and the short of it is that since there were reasons of State why she could not do me an injury in that respect, I could not understand why she could have been so eager to find the lady in question. Putting up her glasses she examined the people about her attentively.

"Ah! there she is!" she said at last. "Come this way, Prince, and remember that you are to behave yourself very nicely, under pain of my severest displeasure."

So saying, she led the way towards a lady and a gentleman who had hitherto been hidden from our sight by the fashionable crowd. The man I recognised immediately; but his companion I could not remember ever to have seen before. One thing was certain, she was a wonderfully beautiful girl. She was exquisitely dressed, and carried herself with a distinction that raised her above the level of the other beauties. I seemed to know her face, and yet I could not recall where I had seen it before. Then, in a flash, I remembered.

"Princess Otilie," I began, as soon as we stood face to face.

The Duchess stared at me in surprise.

"Can it be possible that you know each other?" she cried. "I had quite made up my mind that you had not met, and I was hoping to do you both a charitable action."

Turning to the girl before me, I said, "You are the Princess Otilie, are you not?"

"Yes," she answered; "and if I am not mistaken you are Prince Paul of Pannonia. Do you remember that dreadful day when the horses ran away and nearly killed me at the palace gates?"

"Is it likely I shall ever forget it?" I returned. "The whole scene rises before my eyes at this moment. What an age has elapsed since then!"

The Duchess and Lord Newmarket, who were kindly souls, strolled away, leaving us together. I looked again at the girl; really she was remarkably beautiful. There could be no sort of doubt about that. I had never seen anyone in my life half so fair.

"Can we not discover a couple of chairs, and try to recall some other impressions?" I inquired.

"It would be very pleasant," she replied; and we accordingly strolled away together.

"If I may be allowed to say so, you have altered a great deal since I last saw you," I began, when we had found our chairs and had seated ourselves upon them.

"And perhaps I might return the compliment," she continued. "How strange it seems that we should meet here, does it not?"

"Very strange indeed," I answered. "You have not been back to Pannonia since that dreadful time?"

As I said it the folly of the remark became apparent to me. Was it not my own father who had sent the Prince of Lilienhöhe into exile? And had not the latter, as soon as the Ramonyi dynasty was overthrown, stepped into the breach and attempted to seize the throne for himself? That for the moment I had embarrassed her I could see. However, she evaded it with a cleverness that showed she was not wanting in that rarest of all gifts – tact.

"We have been living in England for the last seven years," she replied, with a candour that concealed her real feelings. "My father declares that he is getting too old to move about, and sometimes I think he will never cross the Channel again."

I did not say so to her, though I thought it, that I deemed it a fortunate thing, not only for himself, but also for Pannonia, that he had come to so sensible a conclusion. How foolish and futile the whole business appeared when looked at through the diminishing glass of years! The feud between the two families, the constant quarrels, the scarcely veiled hatred on both sides, and then the last outbreak and its consequences! My father had sent Lilienhöhe into exile only to follow himself, a few days later. And now, strangest part of all, here was I, Paul of Pannonia, talking to Ottilie of Lilienhöhe in the garden of the Heir Apparent to the throne that had given us both shelter.

When Fate takes it into her head to jest, she does not do so in a half-hearted fashion. After a little while I inquired how it was I had not met her before.

"I was only presented last year," she answered; "and this season we were late in coming to town. Indeed, had it not been for the Prince of Liedensvald's visit to England, I doubt very much whether we should have come at all."

For once in my life I was grateful to my cousin Wilhelm.

Really she was beautiful. I remembered what a dainty, fragile child she had seemed that day when I had led her hand-in-hand, after the accident, to see the statues in the great hall at Pannonia. In that respect she had scarcely altered. Her beauty seemed of a different description from any I had met before. Her skin was so transparent, her hands and feet so small, her head so daintily poised, that the most fastidious critic could scarcely have discovered a fault in her. Later on she inquired for Max, and I furnished her with a faithful description of him, trying to make her realise what a splendid fellow he was.

"You admire him as much as ever, I can see," she said. "Your brother is fortunate in having so able a champion."

I did not grasp her meaning then, but it has become more plain to me since. We changed the topic, and after a while, feeling that it would not do for me to monopolise her altogether, I rose, remarking, as I did so, that I hoped to have the pleasure of meeting her again very soon. I ran over the list of houses to which I had invitations that evening, and inquired whether she was likely to be at any one of them.

"We are going to Lady Cummingdale's musical first," she said; "then we go on to the Countess of Winterbourne's dance, and afterwards to Lady Basingstoke's."

"Then perhaps I may have the pleasure of a dance with you at Winterbourne House?" I answered.

"I shall be very pleased," she returned.

At that moment a tall, handsome man, perhaps sixty years of age, with a fierce grey moustache and almost snow-white hair, crossed the lawn and made his way towards us. I did not know him, but I was soon to do so, for the Princess Ottilie took a step forward to meet him, saying as she did so:

"Papa, let me introduce you to Prince Paul of Pannonia."

The other gave a start and drew himself up to his full height.

"I am honoured in being permitted to make the acquaintance of his Royal Highness," he replied, a little stiffly, so I thought. "The last time I saw you, sir, was on the day you were baptised. I trust his Majesty and the Queen enjoy good health?"

I replied to the effect that they were as well as could be expected of people of their years, and after a few polite nothings made my adieu, vaguely wondering what my mother would say when she heard of the interview, as I had no doubt she very soon would.

That evening, during the long state dinner at Buckingham Palace, I found myself continually thinking of the pretty Princess. Never had an admirably arranged banquet seemed so tedious. I was all anxiety for it to be over, in order that I might get away to Winterbourne House. At last it came to an end, and very soon after I was bowling along in my cab towards Carlton Terrace. On entering the house I made my way up the crowded staircase to the ball-room, where dancing was in full swing. Having paid my respects to my hostess, I searched the room for Princess Ottilie. I discovered her dancing with one of the foreign military attachés. She was not aware of my presence, so I took up a position in an alcove and watched her. If she had looked beautiful that afternoon, she was doubly so now. I noticed that she was taller than the majority of women present, but her slender figure was so exquisitely proportioned that the fact at first glance was not apparent. The dance over, I accosted her.

"I hope your dances are not all bespoke, Princess," I said. "I have the liveliest recollection of your promise this afternoon."

"You may have the next waltz if you like," she answered. "We shall be going on to Lady Basingstoke's in half an hour, so that I do not know how many I shall have time for here."

"In that case I must have this one and endeavour to extort a dance from that house also," I retorted. "Experience has taught me that there is nothing like being beforehand in these little affairs."

Seeing how matters stood, the attaché, with all the *aplomb* of a Frenchman, paid her a charming compliment, and gracefully took himself off. We thereupon passed into the conservatory together.

"Is your father here to-night?" I inquired. "I have not seen him."

"No," said she. "Papa never condescends to dance. He is probably playing *ecarté* at this moment at his club. I need not describe to you the pleasure it gave him to make your acquaintance this afternoon."

I glanced at her to see whether she were joking, but her face was as serious as even she could wish. Naturally, I expressed my delight at what she had told me, but I could not help believing that she had derived a wrong impression from her father's compliments. The Prince of Lilienhöhe had been such a determined foe of my family for so many years, that I could not see how making my acquaintance could possibly afford him pleasure. However, I had no time to give to the subject then, for the band was playing the introduction to the next waltz, and it was time to return to the ball-room. A few steps were sufficient to show me that the Princess, like all Pannonians, was an excellent dancer. To the melody of one of Strauss' waltzes I steered her through the crowd. The fragrance of her hair was intoxicating, and for some reason, I cannot explain what, it carried me back to the day, so many years ago, when she had taken my hand in hers, and had cemented our friendship with the three magic words, "I like you." How little we had dreamed then of the place where we should next meet, and under what circumstances it would be brought about! In those days the Ramonyi dynasty had seemed as firmly seated upon the throne as that of any other ruling family in Europe. Now we were in exile, and our country was given over to the tender mercies of the populace.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.