

A ROYAL ROMANCE

By Clive R. Fenn

I.

It was one resplendent evening toward the end of June, and the palace of the king at Varoff, in Silonia, was brilliant with many lights, and the vast salons were thronged. His majesty, the enlightened and popular King Sigismund, was that night in one of his best moods and had been heard to speak in complimentary fashion to Prince Paul, the heir to the throne, about the performance which had taken place an hour earlier of "Le Roi l'a dit."

"It is fine," he said. "Decidedly it is fine. I have greatly enjoyed it."

The prince had merely coldly acquiesced in the remark and the king had chided him sharply on his want of enthusiasm.

"What ails you?" asked the king. "You are moody and sad, and this is a time to put away sad thoughts." And then the prince, after a moment's hesitation, had said something which made the king start angrily.

"It is the truth, sire," said Paul, earnestly. "It is with me an affair of life and death."

"The truth, you say?" ejaculated the monarch. "No, no; not, maybe, the real truth, but only a boy's whim."

"Oh my life, sire, it is as I ventured to tell you. I cannot give her up," was the fervent response.

And then, whilst the aristocratic and brilliant assemblage in the royal palace was dancing, his majesty put his hand affectionately on the young man's arm and drew him away into an ante-room.

"Tell me more," he began, kindly, as he sat down on a divan. "Don't be hasty. I am a father, although I am a king."

For answer the prince dropped on one knee before the king. "There is nothing more to tell you, sire. Only that I love her deeply, that I shall always love her, that I cannot live without her, that she is with me wherever I go—in the city ways, in the forest, on the battlefield during the last war."

The king looked thoughtful and sad and then he extended his right hand.

"Rise," he said. "Sit down there in front of me," and he indicated a chair.

"You will listen, sire?" said the young man, imploringly. "You will realise what it means to me?"

The king rose and took a step or two up and down the apartment with his hands behind his back.

"Listen?" he said, musingly. "Why?"—and he faced the prince suddenly—"I would rather listen to that music than to these words of yours. I thought you had forgotten."

The prince made a despairing gesture and the king shook his head. "Marry Mlle. Xenia, the actress," he said, musingly. "Why, it would make our court a laughing stock; and in these days is it not necessary jealously to guard the dignity of kingship more assiduously than of old? I cannot argue with you. You must be brave, you must forget, there is no other way, there is no other way! You must tell her that all is at an end."

"But, sire, if you would see her!" exclaimed the prince in a despairing tone. "I did see her," was the grave reply.

"And—"

"She acted charmingly; and she rides well, I hear, for they tell me that you and she have been seen in the park of a morning. O, she played well this evening, and sang still better; yes, certainly she sang still better. But one can admire a nightingale and then go on one's way. Come, come, you must see that it is useless. She is an ornament to our court, and more than that, maybe, but she is no wife for the heir to the throne. You do not belong to yourself, but to your country, to your family. The world would laugh. London, Vienna, Paris, St. Petersburg would be vastly amused; and," continued the king, as he walked to the end of the apartment and raised the curtain, "it is not my wish to provide amusement for London, Paris, or St. Petersburg, to say nothing of Vienna," and he walked out of the salon and proceeded toward the ball-room.

But he stopped half-way and motioned to a chamberlain to approach him.

"Tell Mlle. Xenia," he said to that functionary, "that I wish to speak to her." And as the chamberlain retired with a low bow his majesty turned and exchanged a laughing word with a courtier who stood near.

A minute later, as Mlle. Xenia approached, the king could do nothing but admire. She was a representative of that ethereal Saxon loveliness which the painters of the north have typified, and as she made a deep curtsy the king sighed deeply at a thought which flashed through his mind.

"I wished," he said, "to compliment you."

"Your majesty is too good," replied the girl, tremulously.

"Tell me," went on the king, and there was a ring of sympathy in his voice, "whence come you?"

There was a moment's hesitation, "You forget," said his majesty, with an indulgent smile. "You have forgotten your native country?"

"Your majesty is very good."

"It is no empty compliment. I scorn such," said the king, gravely. "But as to your life. Are there not hardships in it? There should not be to you."

The girl bowed again. "Oh, yes, sire; we have our sad days."

"You have beauty, mademoiselle—great beauty," and the king eyed her searchingly, as if he could read her soul; and you have also talent, and with these two things one should go far in this world. I wish you good fortune and a large measure of happiness," and with those words the monarch turned away.

For a moment Xenia was lost in thought, and then a voice at her elbow said, gravely:

"I claim this dance, mademoiselle." She started and drew back as if frightened, but then recovered herself.

Prince Paul was facing her and bowing low. "I have alarmed you," he exclaimed, with a note of concern in his voice.

"No—no," she stammered. "But you look so terribly serious, so woebegone. What calamity are you fearing?"



"No, no, sire. I come from Germany." But the girl spoke as though she had something she wished to hide—some sad chapter which the world was not to read.

"But," mused the king, "Germany is a vast realm. Is that all? One may come from the north or from the south."

"I was last at Vienna, sire."

"You met delightfully," said the king. "You charmed us all to-night," he added, with sympathy.

"I am grateful, sire."

"It is the truth."

The girl bowed low.

"Your singing pleased me much," the monarch went on.

ardently into her eyes. "You will not forget your promise?" he said, earnestly.

"I ought to forget it," she responded, and there was a note of melancholy in her tone. "It is my duty to forget all about it."

"But you will come?" he urged, vehemently.

The girl hesitated a second longer. "In an hour's time," he went on.

"Yes," she said at last, "I will be there."

"Thank you—thank you!" he cried passionately.

The dance had only just ended when an aide-de-camp asked leave to speak to the prince, who was called away, and soon after a chamberlain came up to where Xenia was sitting.

He was a tall, good-looking functionary, modest of bearing, however, for his position at court was so great that he did not require to remind any one of its importance.

"Mademoiselle," he said, courteously. "I have to beg you to follow me."

"Where to?" she asked curiously, but rising as she spoke.

"To the king, mademoiselle."

"His Majesty wishes to see me?" she exclaimed, wondering.

"Yes, mademoiselle; the king desired me to inform you that he wished to speak with you."

"It is strange," she said, half to herself, "for the king did me the honour to speak to me but half an hour ago."

The officer bowed.

"It is not a trouble to mademoiselle?" he said, politely.

She smiled, as if no answer were requisite to such a question. "On the contrary, it is a great honour," and she followed the chamberlain through the brilliant ballroom to the king's reception chamber; whilst as they passed people turned and looked on inquiringly, feeling sure that the great artiste who had charmed all that evening was on the way to receive royal thanks and praise for what she had done.

II.

"It is here, mademoiselle," said the chamberlain, courteously, as he stopped before the curtained doorway at which stood an officer of the bodyguard, who drew back and saluted.

The curtain parted and Xenia found herself for a second time in the space of an hour in the presence of the king. His majesty dismissed a secretary as she entered and motioned to her to sit down.

"I have asked you here to see me," he began, "because I have a message for you—an important message."

"A message for me, sire?" she queried, in alarm.

"Yes," he said, gravely, and he leant back in his chair, and placed a hand on each arm. "Mlle. Xenia, it is an important message—the message of duty. I will not slight your intelligence by informing you that your beauty has turned the head of my son, but I will honour your intelligence, mademoiselle, by asking you to listen to what I have to say. Mademoiselle," he continued, with more feeling, "would you do something for me?"

"I am grateful to your majesty," replied the girl. "I feel deeply all the many kindnesses I have received at Varoff."

"And if you would require these—these kindnesses—but stay, it is not for kings to be satisfied with words alone. Accept this trifle," and his majesty handed her a sparkling ring.

"You would—and you could—offer a return?"

"Yes, sire."

The king hesitated.

"You are surprised at something, sire?" the girl asked timidly, and her fingers pressed the collet of the ring.

"No, no; I am not surprised—not at all surprised, mademoiselle."

"If, sire, you would tell me what I should do, I have received so much kindness here that it would be pleasant to give any return."

"That is precisely the difficulty," and the king knit his brows.

"The difficulty, sire?"

He nodded.

"You will dance?" he said, pleadingly, disregarding her remark. "The calamity would be your refusal. You will dance?"

"Yes, yes, if you wish it," she answered, with a smile. "But you are tragic, prince. You frighten me."

"If I wish it!" he exclaimed—passionately. "You ask that—you! Why, I—"

"Oh!" she began, in protest, and a second later they were circling the room.

"You are pale to-night, prince," she said, suddenly, trying to give a light turn to thought; but he did not heed her remark.

Then as they valed on he looked