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ADVERTISE IN THE MAIL AND ADVOCATE

Franz Josef, the "Man of Sorrows"; Romantic Secrets of the Royal House of Austria.

Never in history have lips uttered a more terrible curse than that pronounced nearly seventy years ago on Franz Josef, Emperor of Austria, and never has a curse been more pitilessly and exactly fulfilled. Standing over the mutilated body of her husband, the Hungarian patriot and martyr, the Countess Karolyi, distracted with grief, invoked Heaven to wreck vengeance on the man at whose bidding her husband had been so foully done to death and her life, so full of happiness, laid desolate—"May Heaven and Hell blast his happiness; may he be smitten in the person of those he loves; may his life be wretched, and may his children be brought to ruin."

Such were the terrible words uttered by the widowed Countess as, with eyes blinded with tears, she looked on the dead face of the man who had been to her more than all the world. When Franz Josef, then in the full pride of his life, idolised by his subjects and with the vista of life stretching golden before him, heard of the widow's curse, he is said to have "laughed light-heartedly at the foolish words of a mad-woman." But mark how inexorably and literally the "madwoman's" curse has been fulfilled.

The wife whom he led to the altar in the first bloom of her incomparable beauty, to whom he gave all his heart as she gave hers to him, was driven into exile by his cruelty and infidelities, and thanked God for the assassin's blow which at last released her from a life that was far worse than death.

His only son, whom he loved passionately, was found one January morning in 1889, dead and mutilated beyond recognition in the Castle of Mayerling, by the side of the beautiful girl, Marie Vatschera, who preferred death with her lover to life without him. His brother-in-law the ill-fated Maximilian, died tragically in Mexico, shot by the subjects who would not have him as Emperor; and his sister-in-law, the Duchess d'Alencon, perished horribly in the flames of the charity bazaar in Paris in 1897.

His daughter, Sophia, died suddenly and mysteriously half-a-century ago. Several of his nephews made disgraceful alliances with ballet-dancers and other maids of low degree and doubtful morals, and the Archduke Johann Salvator, who aroused his displeasure by marrying a tradesman's daughter, was driven by Franz Josef's cruel persecution to exile, and—so far as the world knows—to his death. And, to crown these calamities, it was the assassination of his nephew and heir, Francis Ferdinand that plunged Europe into the horrors of the most terrible war in the world's history, at a time when the aged Emperor's life was ebbing to its close.

Does Franz Josef laugh now, as he drains the last bitter dregs of the cup of life, as he laughed nearly seventy years ago, when the vision of the widowed Countess standing over the body of her murdered husband comes to him—as come it must, and when to his ears comes the far, faint echo of her curse, "may Heaven and Hell blast his happiness, and may his family be exterminated?"

One could spare pity for a man so dogged by disaster to the very verge of the grave, had he not deserved so pitiless a fate. But even he, when he looks back on the long years of his misused life, of gloriously opportunities wickedly and prodigally abused, must know in his heart that, crushing and seemingly cruel as are the blows that have been dealt him, he has deserved them all.

In all the dark record of the Emperor's life there is no chapter so black or damning as that which tells the story of his treatment of the beautiful woman who, in full and glad surrender, gave her life in to his keeping more than sixty years ago, and of whom in later years one of her nieces draws this pathetic picture—"I went to the Hofburg with my mother, and the Empress received us in special audience. She was dressed in the deepest black. Her face, which looked out like some pale snowflower from the folds of her heavy crape veil, showed traces of incessant weeping, and she had a nervous trick of constantly wiping the corners of her eyes with her handkerchief. . . . I never again saw her alive. When I stood by her coffin in the Imperial vault of the Capucins, I felt that she was happy at last—released from a world which had brought her so much sadness and sorrow, and re-united to her beloved son, Rudolph."

In the days of her girlhood, when the Princess Elizabeth once accom-

panied her father incognito to a village fair, a gipsy woman, who had asked permission to tell her fortune told her, "You will live to wear a double crown—that of an Empress and that of a martyr," and although she smiled with incredulous amusement at the prediction, it was destined to a tragic fulfilment, for her Imperial crown was soon transformed into a crown of thorns.

It was on a summer day in the year 1853 that the young Emperor of Austria, who, although but 23, had already worn his crown for five years, set out on a visit to his kinsman, Duke Maximilian, at his Castle of Possenhofen. His heart was by no means in his journey, for he was sent by his autocratic mother, the Archduchess Sophia, to make the acquaintance of his cousin Sophia (the Duke's elder daughter) whom she had chosen for her son's bride. But although no more reluctant knight ever went to woo a lady, not many hours had passed after his arrival at the Castle before he blessed the seemingly unkind Fate that had sent him on an unwelcome journey.

His first glimpse of the bride designed for him was sufficient to dispel any hopes he might have had; for the Princess Sophia proved to be a very plain, shy, awkward girl, from whose presence the young Emperor was thankful to escape as quickly and decently as he could; and in his disappointment, he set out for a solitary ramble in the pine woods that encircled the Castle, doubtless to find some excuse for an early return home and little dreaming that adventure and destiny dogged his moody footsteps.

He had not wandered far, so the story is told, when at a turn in the forest path, he found himself face to face with a vision more beautiful than any he had ever set eyes on—a slender, white-robed figure, with proudly-carried head, from which the hair rippled in a golden-brown cascade almost to her feet, and whose eyes looked half fearfully, half mischievously, into his. With a low bow and a sweep of his hat the Emperor did involuntary homage to the woodland queen who had strayed across his path, to which she responded with a deep curtsy and a mischievous glance from her upturned eyes which set his pulses beating quickly. "And whom, may I ask," he said, "have I the honour of addressing? What are you—a fairy of the woods or a creature of flesh and blood like myself?"

"The latter, if it please your Majesty," was the answer, with a merry laugh and another dainty curtsy. "I am the Princess Elizabeth Amelie of Bavaria, and entirely at your service." "Ah," then, said Franz Josef, with an exclamation of pleasure "you must be my cousin; and I may thus claim as a right the honour of taking your hand?" "With pleasure your Majesty," answered the Princess, as, with a coquettish glance, she held out a tiny white hand for her Imperial kinsman to grasp.

"But how is it," said the Emperor, still holding the hand which he seemed reluctant to release, "that, since you are my cousin, I did not see you at the Castle?" "For the same reason, sir," came the answer, "that you will not see me at dinner to-night. You see I am the Cinderella of the family—the baby who must be kept out of sight to give Sophia her chance—I think it is rather a shame, don't you?" she asked with a bewitching pout of her pretty lips. And, of course, Franz declared emphatically that he did; and, further, that if she didn't appear at dinner that evening he certainly wouldn't.

Thus, when the Duke and his family were assembled for dinner a few hours later, he was amazed to see Elizabeth, in all her finery, enter the room leaning on the Emperor's arm and chatting gaily to him; and in spite of her parents' ill-concealed annoyance, she took her seat at the table, at her Imperial cousin's right hand, as naturally and unconcernedly as if it were her proper place.

Needless to say, Franz Josef displayed no anxiety to leave the castle in the halcyon days that followed—days of delightful rambling through the woods, of long rides and sweet communion with the girl whose beauty and witcheries had taken his heart by storm. And the climax came, when, a few weeks later, "Cinderella" was allowed to appear at a ball given in his honour, wearing, at his request, her simplest dress and a single rose in her glorious hair for all adornment. During the whole evening the Emperor was inseparable from her; he danced exclusively with her, and seemed so ecstatically hap-

py that not one of the guests was at all surprised at the news they were so soon to hear.

"During the interval for refreshments," it is said, "the Emperor led his beautiful partner to a table on which was an album full of pictures of the various national costumes of Austria. 'These,' he said, 'are all my subjects. Say one word and you shall reign over them, too.' For answer, the Princess timidly placed her hand on that of her lover, and thus simply was sealed the compact which made 'Cinderella' not only queen of Franz Josef's heart, but Empress of Austria."

Probably never has wedded life opened more full of promise. It was to all appearance a union of hearts in all the ardour of first love. But Elizabeth's dream of happiness was not destined to last long. The first shock of disillusion followed quickly on her triumphant bridal entry into Vienna to the clashing of joy-bells, the booming of cannon and the thunderous cheers through which she made her regal progress. She was quick to discover that she had an enemy in the Archduchess Sophia, whose designs for her son's marriage she had so innocently thwarted; and also that her husband was but a puppet in the hands of his strong-willed, autocratic mother. It was the Archduchess and not Franz Josef who was the real ruler of Austria, and the servile Court reflected her attitude to the unwelcome bride. "Taking its cue from the Archduchess," we are told, "the whole Court learnt to seize every opportunity to vex, wound and humiliate her, whom they were already calling the 'little goose from Bavaria.' As soon as she opened her mouth or made a gesture, she heard ironic whispers around her and was greeted with polite, ironic smiles."

She also found herself hemmed in on all sides by the most rigid etiquette. The girl who had been accustomed to uncontrolled freedom in her Bavarian home—to "run wild" at her own sweet will, was not permitted to move a step without her attendant ladies and all the ceremonial of State. She could not even see her husband in his apartments without first securing permission and running the gauntlet of amused and openly sneering flunkies.

But her greatest disillusionment came when she discovered that, before her honeymoon was well over, the husband she loved so well was seeking the company of other women. "Even before his marriage," Princess Radziwill says, "there was hardly a pretty woman in Vienna who had not seen Franz Josef at her feet. The Archduchess Sophia had rather encouraged her son's amorous excursions, hoping this to divert his attention from politics, the control of which she preferred to keep in her own hands."

To the Emperor's wife the shock of these discoveries, all so utterly unexpected, was heart-crushing. As she herself confessed, "I had one month of happiness; then all my life was laid in ruins." Too proud to reproach or plead with her husband, she tried bravely for a time to conceal her broken heart behind a smiling face, affecting gaiety in the presence of others, and spending long hours of weeping in the privacy of her bed-chamber.

But when her baby son (Rudolph of tragic memory) was born, and, in spite of all her tears and pleadings, was taken from her arms by her autocratic mother-in-law, to be brought up under her direction, the last barrier of her forbearance was broken down. She could endure no more; at any cost she must escape from a life that had become intolerable; and one day she left Vienna with her old and devoted nurse for companion, to seek forgetfulness—anywhere.

Then followed one of the most pathetic pilgrimages in human history. From one country to another she wandered all over the face of Europe, seeking oblivion, and never finding it. We see her, as the leaden years pass, now living in retirement in Normandy or Brittany, or at her castle in Hungary; now she emerges from her obscurity to dazzle England by her beauty and her graceful and reckless horsemanship; but, neither in seclusion from the world nor in her feverish pursuit of distraction, finding a moment's peace.

She would spend weeks in rambling among the mountain solitudes or cruising in her yacht, and when mountains and sea failed to bring any balm to her stricken heart, she sought a feverish distraction in building a palace on which she lavished three million pounds. At intervals her love for her boy



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would conquer her dread and draw on her back for a time to Vienna, but on her first visit, when she held out loving arms to the child, he received her advances with scowls and sullen looks, and, instead of flying to her, as she had fondly hoped, turned his back on her, and ran out of the room to tell his grandmother that the "monster" had returned. With infinite patience and tenderness, however, she set herself to the strange task of winning her own son's love and trust, and the one solace in her life of sorrows was that at last she succeeded.

Thus, in lonely wandering, brightened only by occasional glimpses of her boy, the long, dark years passed bringing fresh sorrows to add to her burden—the tragic deaths of her sister and brother; the pitiful end of her favourite cousin, Ludwig, the "mad King" of Bavaria, and last, the disgraceful end of her son at the Castle of Mayerling. Thus, pursued by disaster, the Empress wore her martyr's crown to her last day. She had now no heart to fare forth into the world, even to seek distraction. She shut herself up in her Corfu Castle, where, we are told, she would sit for whole days in the little Greek temple she had built on the seashore—a solitary, crepe-clad figure, plunged in the depths of grief.

At dead of night, when the world slept, she would steal out into the gardens, clothed from head to foot in black, a black veil shrouding her face, and would make her way to the beautiful monument she had erected to her son, Rudolph. Here, before the broken column, on the pedestal of which is placed a marble angel stretching forth its right hand, as if in protection of the medallion on which is chiselled a portrait of the ill-fated Prince, she would spend hours in deep contemplation, forgetful of the passing time.

To her husband she had long been dead. He was happy with his succession of mistresses, and had no thought to spare for the woman whose heart he had stolen, only to trample it ruthlessly under his feet. Once only during the long years had there been any hope of reconciliation between husband and wife, who together they stood by the side of their dead son's body and clasped hands in their common grief, but the hope died almost at its birth. Franz Josef was under the spell of Katrina Schrott, an actress of the Burg Theatre, who had caught him in her toils some years previously, and in whose clever hands he was the veriest puppet. And Elizabeth, realising the hopelessness of weaning him from the enchantress, once more returned to the solitude of her Corfu palace, from which her son's death had drawn her.

For nine years more she bore the heavy burden of her sorrows. Then,

at last, death came to her in an assassin's cowardly blow. As her life ebbed painlessly away, her attendant lady asked her, "Are you in pain?" "No," whispered the dying woman, "A sad and sweet smile hovered over her lips, her hands made a gesture of thanks to Heaven, and the eyelids closed that would open no more on earth."

When news of his wife's tragic death came to the Emperor, it is said, he burst into tears and retired to his private apartments to hide his grief. An hour later, however, he was finding consolation in the arms of Katrina, in the lovely villa, at Hietzing, a suburb of Vienna, which is one of the most costly presents he has lavished on his favourite.

"After Elizabeth's death," Princess Radziwill tells us, "Frau Schrott's influence became still stronger than it had been before she assumed the task of comforting the bereaved widower, who suddenly developed a violent affection for the wife he had so cruelly ill-treated, and declared himself inconsolable at her death. Frau Schrott is at present a stout, middle-aged woman, with no pretence at a figure, with white hair and a fat face, which occasionally turns red in the wrong place."

But this commonplace woman, sprung from the people, has a magic which no other woman has ever possessed to keep Franz Josef at her feet—least of them all the woman—the most beautiful Princess in Europe—to whom, more than sixty years ago he vowed undying fidelity, and whose life he made desolate within a month of his wedding-day.

Here we leave this Emperor of well-deserved tragedy. The Countess's curse has been terribly fulfilled to the letter, and the end of his woes is not yet reached. There still remain in his cup probably the bitterest dregs of all, and no human power can save him from drinking them.

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