

READINGS FROM NEW BOOKS.

THE KING'S LOVE-LETTERS.*

"Well, don't you think it is time to begin reading?" asked Adeline, an hour or two afterwards in a secluded corner of prandial candlelight.

"All right!" said Wasteney, diving abruptly into the pearl-fishery of his manuscript.

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"It was May in the King's garden, and the King sat there towards the close of the afternoon, with his admiring court about him. He was still young to look on, but there was that sadness in his dark, handsome face which tells that the heart is old before its time. No one knew how sorrow had come to the King, but to eyes accustomed to read the human soul there was sorrow in all his ways, even in his gayest moments. Such might guess that his half-cynical preoccupation with light pleasures, his absorption in the toys of art and emotion, served only to veil an inner life of a very different seriousness. His kingdom was so small that there was nothing for a king to do, except to superintend his architects and the various artists who daily wrought at his palace, in obedience to his learned and innovating fancy. Nothing more serious than that—but idler hours the King spent in such

delicate literary trifling as was occupying him and his court this afternoon.

"It had been one of his fancies to revive the fantastic toys of the *cours d'amours*, and he was looked upon by all his court as a master of the arts of literary love. It was one of his fancies to revive the love-letter as a literary form, to use it merely as a mould, as the poet uses the ballade or the sestina, and the experiments he had made in that subtle form had won him high appreciation among *les précieuses* of his court. 'The King's Love-Letters' went from hand to hand in beautifully illuminated copies, and the boudoir of every lady of quality was duly provided with the latest perfumed edition. For gallants and all casuists of the gentle art they were regarded as an indispensable manual. Of course no one dreamed of attaching to them any personal human application. It was understood that they were exercises by a master in the difficult art of prose, nothing more; for it was well known that, though the King might occasionally dally with this or that lady of his court, out of courtesy or *ennui*, he was seriously attached to no one—no one, at all events, that any one knew of.

"To-day the King had written a wonderful new love-letter, and as he languidly read it to his court—a court which in secret he despised—scribes

*The Love-Letters of the King: or, The Life Romantic. By Richard Le Gallienne. Copyright, 1901. Little, Brown & Co. Price \$1.50.

were busy in the background taking down each delicately-chosen and carefully-placed word that fell from his lips.

"When he had finished reading, the court broke out into the customary ecstasies of appreciation. Enthusiastic ladies pressed close to the King and marvelled at his knowledge of the deep heart of love, *petit-maitres* picked out this or that sentence, for its masterly this or its miraculous that. No writer of the day equalled the King, said one, in the superb orchestration of prose. This was undeniable, for no one, including king and critic, knew exactly what such praise meant. But it sounded well—the 'orchestration of prose!'—and there was a murmur of applause.

"An imitative critic thereon ventured to praise a passage where what he might call the oboe of prose for a moment dominated the grander music—a very blackbird of a sentence!

"And there were many more comments of a like nature.

"The King listened and smiled. All the time he was watching the lonely, somewhat bewildered face of a beautiful young girl. He surmised that she was a stranger at the court, come up from some simple country castle to visit friends in the great world. Her face had caught his eye as he began reading, and he had watched it all the while. It had remained throughout like the face of one who listens to a song in a language he does not understand. Its only change was a deepening perplexity—which seemed meekly to ask the meaning of it all. This troubled young face was the only critic the King heeded. For his sad eyes saw the light of love upon it, the light that was on no other face. Presently, as his flatterers spent themselves and dispersed in groups about the garden, he took an opportunity to speak to his silent little critic.

"All these people have been so kind."

he said, laughing, 'but you have said nothing kind to me.'

"The girl's eyes filled with tears. She had never before spoken to a king, and she was very timid. But, dropping a quaint little country curtsy, she summoned courage to say:

"It was very beautiful—your Majesty—but it was not a love-letter."

"Then, with the naïve daring of the innocent, she slipped her hand into her bosom and drew out a warm little writing, which she offered to the King to read.

"The King read it gravely, and, as he read it, it was his eyes that filled with tears. When he had finished reading, he folded it reverently, and, giving it back to her, said: 'No, mine was not a love-letter.'

"Then, taking off his hat and bending slightly, he kissed her hand and turned away with a sigh."

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"You have written more than that," said Adeline, as Wasteney's suddenly ceased reading; "won't you go on?"

"Hadn't I better keep some for next time? Besides, if you don't mind, I would rather not read any more to-night. Let us dine together again to-morrow, and I will read you the rest—that is, so far as it goes; for it is a long way from being finished—"

His face had grown drawn and tired, and his eyes seemed suddenly filled with memories.

"Of course," said Adeline, divining more than he thought. "But tell me this before you go. The King understood because he had really known love once. Is that the meaning?"

"Yes!" said Wasteney's, and half to himself, "the King had known love."

"I thought so," said Adeline, with a sigh.

As Wasteney's spoke he saw a vision of a woman—gathering mushrooms in the dawn!

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"The King understood," said Adeline, as dinner neared its close the next evening, and taking up their talk where they had left it, "because he had really known love. Now go on."

"Yes! the King understood," proceeded Wasteney, "because in a golden box set with moonstones he had five real love-letters. They were very short, and he had come by them in this way."

"One morning, rising early, as was his custom, he had walked alone in a dewy upland some little way from his palace, and he had suddenly come upon a beautiful woman gathering mushrooms. For a few moments she did not see the King, and he had time to see how beautiful she was, as she bent down here and there, softly tearing the milk-white things out of the green grass. She was all in white, save her hair, which was black as—"

"Oh, she had black hair!" interrupted Adeline involuntarily.

"Yes! very black hair!" Wasteney continued, "and her body was very tall and straight, and her skin white as the pith of a peeled willow wand."

"Presently she saw the King and stopped gathering the mushrooms, looking long at him with great fearless eyes, like a child's. The King had never seen such eyes, and she had never seen such eyes as the King's; so they stood long looking strangely at each other, alone on the uplands in the silence of the morning. And such is the mystery of human hearts, that they knew from that look that they would love each other, and no other, as long as they lived. Then the King laughed, and the woman laughed too, as if they had known each other for years."

"Do you know that you are stealing the King's mushrooms?" asked the King.

"Are you the King?"

"Yes."

"The King of all these mushrooms?"

"Yes—every one!"

"What then will happen to me?"

"I will spare your life on one condition—that we sit under yonder tree and eat them together."

"So the King and the woman laughed like children, while they silently gave their hearts to each other."

"Suddenly the woman looked at him with her child's eyes, and said:

"Are you a real king?"

"I think so."

"Do you lead great armies, and govern a mighty land?"

"I have such a little land to govern."

"But you should make it great."

"Stay with me—and I will be a real king."

"Alas! I cannot. I have promised to make another man a king."

"But this will I do," said the woman after a silence. "I will meet you once a year in the meadow and ask you that question: *Are you a real king?* and once a year I will write you a letter to help you to be a real king."

"Now when the woman had gone, the King fell sad on account of those eyes, and spent his time idly with minstrels and such folk, and became from year to year less and less a king. But each year as the day came round, the King went up to the meadow at early dawn, and there was the woman awaiting him—as each year there came a plumed and perfumed messenger bringing a letter to the King."

"This was the first letter: *'I love you.'*"

"And the King said: 'This will make me great.'"

"This was the second letter: *'I love you.'*"

"And the King said: 'I will be great.'"

"This was the third letter: *'I love you.'*"

"And the King said: 'I can be great.'"

"This was the fourth letter: *'I love you.'*"

"And the King said: 'I must be great.'"

"But on the fifth year there came

this letter: *'I must love you no more. I can only love a king.'*

"When the King read the fifth letter he went more wildly with his minstrels and flatterers than ever, living weakly in pleasures that gave him no joy, and in the wine and the harp-playing he strove to forget; but always the woman's voice went on asking in his soul: 'Are you a real king?'

"All day long he heard his flatterers call him 'King,' and 'King,' and 'King,' and sometimes when the wine was in him their words would seem true, and he would smile foolishly to himself and say: 'I am a King!—what is one woman out of all the world?'

"And the harps would answer: 'Thou *art* a king!' and the bugles and the banners would answer: 'Thou *art* a king!' But sometimes the King would snatch himself away from them all in bitter sadness, crying aloud in his soul: 'I am *not* a king.' "

Wasteney's had come to the end of his manuscript, and there was a long silence. Adeline just placed her hand gently on his for applause; and presently in her soft pure voice she said:

"But, of course, he is a real king in the end. He *must* be a real king . . . mustn't he?" she asked wistfully, as Wasteney's kept silence.

"Oh, of course," said Wasteney's.