

**THE PRINCESS  
PRISCILLA'S  
FORTNIGHT**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649387892

The Princess Priscilla's fortnight by Elizabeth von Arnim

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.  
Cover @ 2017

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**ELIZABETH VON ARNIM**

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## THE PRINCESS PRISCILLA'S FORTNIGHT

### CHAPTER I

HER Grand Ducal Highness the Princess Priscilla of Lothen-Kunitz was up to the age of twenty-one a most promising young lady. She was not only poetic in appearance beyond the habit of princesses but she was also of graceful and appropriate behaviour. She did what she was told; or, more valuable, she did what was expected of her without being told. Her father, in his youth and middle age a fiery man, now an irritable old gentleman who liked good food and insisted on strictest etiquette, was proud of her on those occasions when she happened to cross his mind. Her mother, by birth an English princess of an originality uncomfortable and unexpected in a royal lady that continued to the end of her life to crop up at disconcerting moments, died when Priscilla was sixteen. Her sisters, one older and one younger than herself, were both far less pleasing to look upon than she was, and much more difficult to manage; yet each married a suitable prince and each became a credit to her House, while as for Priscilla,—well, as for Priscilla, I propose to describe her dreadful conduct.

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But first her appearance. She was well above the average height of woman; a desirable thing in a princess, who, before everything, must impress the public with her dignity. She had a long pointed chin, and a sweet mouth with full lips that looked most kind. Her nose was not quite straight, one side of it being the least bit different from the other,—a slight crookedness that gave her face a charm absolutely beyond the reach of those whose features are what is known as chiselled. Her skin was of that fairness that freckles readily in hot summers or on winter days when the sun shines brightly on the snow, a delicate soft skin that is seen sometimes with golden eyelashes and eyebrows, and hair that is more red than gold. Priscilla had these eyelashes and eyebrows and this hair, and she had besides beautiful grey-blue eyes—calm pools of thought, the court poet called them, when her having a birthday compelled him to official raptures; and because everybody felt sure they were not really anything of the kind the poet's utterance was received with acclamations. Indeed, a princess who should possess such pools would be most undesirable—in Lothen-Kunitz nothing short of a calamity; for had they not had one already? It was what had been the matter with the deceased Grand Duchess; she would think, and no one could stop her, and her life in consequence was a burden to herself and to everybody else at her court. Priscilla, however, was very silent. She had never expressed an opinion, and the inference was that she had no opinion to express. She had not criticized, she had not argued, she had been tractable, obedient, meek. Yet her sisters, who had often criticized and argued, and who had rarely been obedient and never meek, became as I have said the

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wives of appropriate princes, while Priscilla,—well, he who runs may read what it was that Priscilla became.

But first as to where she lived. The Grand Duchy of Lothen-Kunitz lies in the south of Europe; that smiling region of fruitful plains, forest-clothed hills, and broad rivers. It is one of the first places Spring stops at on her way up from Italy; and Autumn, coming down from the north sunburnt, fruit-laden, and blest, goes slowly when she reaches it, lingering there with her serenity and ripeness, her calm skies and her windless days long after the Saxons and Prussians have lit their stoves and got out their furs. There figs can be eaten off the trees in one's garden, and vineyards glow on the hillsides. There the people are Catholics, and the Protestant pastor casts no shadow of a black gown across life. There as you walk along the white roads, you pass the image of the dead Christ by the wayside; mute reminder to those who would otherwise forget of the beauty of pitifulness and love. And there, so near is Kunitz to the soul of things, you may any morning get into the train after breakfast and in the afternoon find yourself drinking coffee in the cool colonnades of the Piazza San Marco at Venice.

Kunitz is the capital of the duchy, and the palace is built on a hill. It is one of those piled-up buildings of many windows and turrets and battlements on which the tourist gazes from below as at the realization of a childhood's dream. A branch of the river Loth winds round the base of the hill, separating the ducal family from the red-roofed town along its other bank. Kunitz stretches right round the hill, lying clasped about its castle like a necklet of ancient stones. At the foot of the castle walls the ducal

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orchards and kitchen gardens begin, continuing down to the water's edge and clothing the base of the hill in a garment of blossom and fruit. No fairer sight is to be seen than the glimpse of these grey walls and turrets rising out of a cloud of blossom to be had by him who shall stand in the market-place of Kunitz and look eastward up the narrow street on a May morning; and if he who gazes is a dreamer he could easily imagine that where the setting of life is so lovely its days must of necessity be each like a jewel, of perfect brightness and beauty.

The Princess Priscilla, however, knew better. To her unfortunately the life within the walls seemed of a quite blatant vulgarity; pervaded by lacqueys, by officials of every kind and degree, by too much food, too many clothes, by waste, by a feverish frittering away of time, by a hideous want of privacy, by a dreariness unutterable. To her it was a perpetual behaving according to the ideas officials had formed as to the conduct to be expected of princesses, a perpetual pretending not to see that the service offered was sheerest lip-service, a perpetual shutting of the eyes to hypocrisy and grasping selfishness. Conceive, you tourist full of illusions standing free down there in the market-place, the frightfulness of never being alone a moment from the time you get out of bed to the time you get into it again. Conceive the deadly patience needed to stand passive and be talked to, amused, taken care of, all day long for years. Conceive the intolerableness, if you are at all sensitive, of being watched by eyes so sharp and prying, so eager to note the least change of expression and to use the conclusions drawn for personal ends that nothing, absolutely nothing, escapes them. Priscilla's sisters took all these things as a matter of course, did not



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care in the least how keenly they were watched and talked over, never wanted to be alone, liked being fussed over, by their ladies-in-waiting. They, happy girls, had thick skins. But Priscilla was a dreamer of dreams, a poet who never wrote poems, but whose soul though inarticulate was none the less saturated with the desires and loves from which poems are born. She, like her sisters, had actually known no other states; but then she dreamed of them continuously, she desired them continuously, she read of them continuously; and though there was only one person who knew she did these things I suppose one person is enough in the way of encouragement if your mind is bent on rebellion. This old person, cause of all the mischief that followed, for without his help I do not see what Priscilla could have done, was the ducal librarian — *Hofbibliothekar*, head, and practically master of the wonderful collection of books and manuscripts whose mere catalogue made learned mouths in distant parts of Europe water and learned lungs sigh in hopeless envy. He too had officials under him, but they were unlike the others: meek youths, studious and short-sighted, whose business as far as Priscilla could see was to bow themselves out silently whenever she and her lady-in-waiting came in. The librarian's name was Fritzing; plain Herr Fritzing originally, but gradually by various stages at last arrived at the dignity and sonorousness of Herr Geheimarchivrath Fritzing. The Grand Duke indeed had proposed to ennoble him after he had successfully taught Priscilla English grammar, but Fritzing, whose spirit dwelt among the Greeks, could not be brought to see any desirability in such a step. Priscilla called him Fritz when her lady-in-waiting dozed; dearest Fritz sometimes even, in the heat of protest

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or persuasion. But afterwards, leaving the room as solemnly as she had come in, followed by her wide-awake attendant, she would nod a formally gracious "Good-afternoon, Herr Geheimrath," for all the world as though she had been talking that way the whole time. The Countess (her lady-in-waiting was the Countess Irmgard von Disthal, an ample slow lady, the unmarried daughter of a noble house, about fifty at this time, and luckily—or unluckily—for Priscilla, a great lover of much food and its resultant deep slumbers) would bow in her turn in as stately a manner as her bulk permitted, and with a frigidity so pronounced that in any one less skilled in shades of deportment it would have resembled with a singular completeness a sniff of scorn. Her frigidity was perfectly justified. Was she not a *hochgeboren*, a member of an ancient house, of luminous pedigree as far back as one could possibly see? And was he not the son of an obscure Westphalian farmer, a person who in his youth had sat barefoot watching pigs? It is true he had learning, and culture, and a big head with plenty of brains in it, and the Countess Disthal had a small head, hardly any brains, no soul to speak of, and no education. This, I say, is true; but it is also neither here nor there. The Countess was the Countess, and Fritzing was a nobody, and the condescension she showed him was far more grand ducal than anything in that way that Priscilla could or ever did produce.

Fritzing, unusually gifted, and enterprising from the first—which explains the gulf between pig-watching and *Hofbibliothekar*—had spent ten years in Paris and twenty in England in various capacities, but always climbing higher in the world of intellect, and had come during this climbing to speak English quite as well as

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most Englishmen, if in a statelier, Johnsonian manner. At fifty he began his career in Kunitz, and being a lover of children took over the English education of the three princesses; and now that they had long since learned all they cared to know, and in Priscilla's case all of grammar at least that he had to teach, he invented a talent for drawing in Priscilla, who could not draw a straight line, much less a curved one, so that she should still be able to come to the library as often as she chose on the pretext of taking a drawing-lesson. The Grand Duke's idea about his daughters was that they should know a little of everything and nothing too well; and if Priscilla had said she wanted to study Shakespeare with the librarian he would have angrily forbidden it. Had she not had ten years for studying Shakespeare? To go on longer than that would mean that she was eager, and the Grand Duke loathed an eager woman.

But he had nothing to say against a little drawing; and it was during the drawing-lessons of the summer Priscilla was twenty-one that the Countess Disthal slept so peacefully. The summer was hot, and the vast room cool and quiet. The time was three o'clock—immediately, that is, after luncheon. Through the narrow open windows sweet airs and scents came in from the bright world outside. Sometimes a bee would wander up from the fruit-gardens below, and lazily drone round shady corners. Sometimes a flock of pigeons rose swiftly in front of the windows, with a flash of shining wings. Every quarter of an hour the cathedral clock down in the town sent up its slow chime. Voices of people boating on the river floated up too, softened to melodiousness. Down at the foot of the hill the red roofs of the town glistened in the sun. Beyond them