

KASSON LETTERS—AUSTRIA AND GERMANY

The eminent attainments and brilliant career of John A. Kasson, as a citizen of Iowa, as a member of its legislature at a critical time, and of the U. S. congress, also as a diplomat in the courts of Europe, are familiar to most Iowans. No public man of this commonwealth has stood higher or deserved greater confidence. Incidents of his long and notable public service have been recited in many articles published in years past in *THE ANNALS*. Whether as minister, as ambassador, as envoy or commissioner representing the United States, he served with honor and distinction, usually gaining the chief point of the position of his country in important negotiations.

In later years Mr. Kasson received some most interesting and informative personal letters from acquaintances made in Austria and Germany, containing significant court sidelights, which are now in the hands of a great niece, Miss Eunice Wead, of Hartford, Conn., who in the article appearing below identifies the writers and persons mentioned in the correspondence and adds enlightening comment, quoting copiously from these letters, which now augment in notable way the extensive Kasson collection of papers in the Manuscript Division of the Iowa State Department of History and Archives. Following the death of Mr. Kasson, her father, the late Charles K. Wead, was the donor of another important group of his uncle's papers.

Edited by EUNICE WEAD

The following letters from Austria and Germany, which have recently come to light, were written in 1888 and 1889 to John A. Kasson, United States minister to those countries from 1877-81 and from 1884-85, respectively. The first letter, with its touch of German idiom, is evidently in response to his request from a personal friend for a report on the mysterious death of Crown Prince Rudolf at Meierling. The others furnish interesting comment from persons close to the court upon the illness and tragic "hundred days" of the Emperor Frederick, and the succession of his son, William II.

DEATH SCANDAL OF CROWN PRINCE

Vienna 24th of February (1889) immediately
after having received yours from the 9th

My dear friend,

I haste to answer your letter, although you may not be entirely satisfied with the details I can give you, as we ourselves are

still in the dark, and the supposition that he did not kill himself, but was killed, keeps still ground.

I'll tell you all I know about it. It is true that Rudolf was demoralised and had begun to drink over measure, and to seek rather low society. It is true that he was unhappy with his wife, who did not understand him, nor did she try to fascinate him. She did not like him a bit, and is rather a cold woman, having also not cared for her child till now. Still she was unhappy enough, and can be excused.

The Crownprince had many love affairs with different women, but the last girl was fatal to him. Of a good family, quite recue in the best circles, the young baroness Vecsera was a real beauty of the Oriental style. Her mother, a born Baltazzy, is said to have had a very bad reputation, and to have known of the liason of her daughter with the Crownprince. The Crownprince desired a divorce from Stephanie and had privately written to the Pope about it—who gave notice to the present Nuntio Galimberti—who then informed the Emperor about this intention of his son. There followed a scene between father and son. The Crownprince begged his father to allow a divorce, and to deprive him of all rights to the throne in order that he might marry the Baroness Vecsera. The Emperor of course refused, and it is said that the son said these words: "If you refuse I shall never appear in these rooms again." These are said to be the last words the son spoke to the father.

On Sunday was a soirée at Princess Reuss', where the Crownprince appeared with Stephanie and the young girl too, beautifully dressed and covered with diamonds. On Monday the Crownprince went to Meierling, the Baroness went shopping with the Countess Larisch (the niece of our Emperess) and on Kohlmarkt, she descended from the carriage, went into another street, where the fiacre Bratfisch of the Crownprince waited and so she went to the Crownprince at some place outside of Vienna and went with him to Meierling.

On Tuesday there was a court family dinner to which the Crownprince was expected, but excused himself by being unwell. The Emperor seemed very much agitated at the non-appearance of his son. On Wednesday in the morning he was found dead in his bed, and the girl at his side. Some say she was shot by him, others that she took poison. Officially "suicide" was pronounced, but those who have seen him say that he had several wounds, that his fingers were broken, and his body mutilated. So it is believed and reported, that some act of jealousy was his death, that two muffled persons attacked him and struck him dead and that the girl hearing him scream, came to his rescue with a pistol, saw him lying senseless, and killed herself or was killed. It is

also said, that he regained yet his senses, but suffered dreadfully and died in two hours.

All this is dreadfully mysterious. She was secretly buried in the neighbourhood, her mother and sister have gone to Greece. People who have in these last times seen and spoken with the Prince, say that he was restless and changable. It is also said that the Prince of Coburg, his brother in law, and the Count Hoyos who were with him, did not know that the Baroness was with him, but supposed another woman.

A gentleman who went to Meierling to bring his corpse to Vienna said that she was even in death beautiful, all covered with flowers.

I have seen the unhappy girl. She *was* a beauty and her eyes were of dark blue, quiet irresistible. Details one cannot hear, those who know them are not allowed to betray them, and Heaven knows when one shall hear the truth. The Empress behaved bravely; it was she who told the dreadful news to the Emperor and who upheld his courage. The widow is not so afflicted about his death, but more about the loss of her position. She is at any rate to be pitied, and I find it cruel to leave her alone at Miramare, where already another Belgian Princess (Charlotte of Mexico) had her tragedy.

The Emperor is broken down, although he works as before day and night—it seems as if this event had united him to his wife. He wrote to the King of Rumania: Je suis humilié comme Père, humilié comme Empereur, humilié dans mon honneur devant tout le monde entier. The successor of our Emperor would now be his brother Charles Ludwig and then his son Franz Este who till now had not a splendid reputation.

Our papers were not allowed to write anything beyond what was officially published—they are all unanimous in praising the Crownprince—and as you know, Rudolf was a great friend of the journalists, having written himself very well. He was gifted in a high degree and very sympathetic—also handsome these last years. He was gay and enjoyed life too much, therefore one cannot believe that he himself put an end to it. He could have kept the girl as his maitresse, as her virtue was not of the greatest ones.

There were reported stories about a Princess Auersperg, the great friend of the Archduchess Valerie, having also been a victim of his love, but people who know all about her, deny everything, and now the story that her brother killed the Prince cannot be true, as he is here in Vienna as officer still. Now, my dear friend, if you are not any clearer after this letter, I cannot help, as nobody knows the truth, and shall ever know it perhaps.

Vienna is a very quiet town, no balls, no court festivals. Do you know where Meierling is? an hour's way off Baden, quite a solitary place in the country . . .

Always yours sincerely,

José

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