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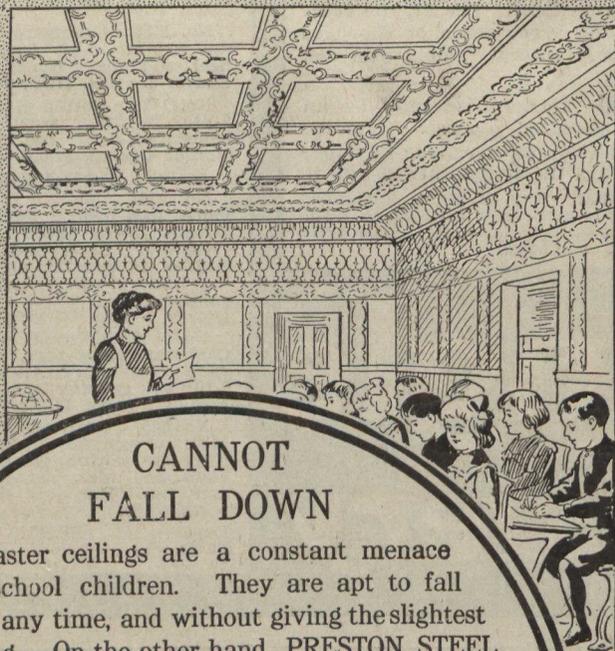
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he care if Austria was fidgeting about the new frontier line and Russia was stirring up strife on account of the Hinterland Provinces? For he was young, and the spring day was fresh and fair, and was not the face of his companion the sweetest he had ever seen?

Why not? he asked himself. And yet, why not again? It seemed to him now that he was an actor, and that these mummies were the creatures who extracted every drop of the honey of his life. It was a revelation to him, a new harmonious existence which he had only read of in books, and every moment brought a fresh surprise; the tall woman, with the dark eyes and ivory complexion, was known far and wide as a great tragic actress. The little man, with the wrinkled face and Trilby hat, was the very prince of comedians. King Fritz picked up the names as they fell from lip to lip. He felt distinctly honoured that he was appreciated in such select company. And, meanwhile, old Rutzstain was laid by the heels beyond the power to interfere for Heaven knows how long a period.

And nobody asked any awkward questions, they all seemed to take the thing for granted. There was a charming gaiety and abandon about these actors. They tossed their quips and cranks from lip to lip, the purple silence of the woods rang with their innocent laughter. And they were not idly curious either. They did not seem to care who the king was, or where he came from, so long as he attuned himself to their melody and danced to their merry air. Here was life, then, fresh and vigorous, and full of sap as an oak in an April wind. The king was young, too; he had the command of means to make the adventure successful.

The talk for the most part was theatrical, and Fritz listened with the keenest possible interest. With one accord the company addressed him as "your Majesty"; it seemed tacitly to be understood that the jest must be kept up.

All the same, there was something almost pathetic in the droop of Nita's lips and the wistfulness of her smile. The thing was utterly wrong. She checked an inclination to start up there and then and tell the truth. But the king's enjoyment was so wholesome and heartwhole that the necessary courage failed her. Still, it did not matter. The little romance would be ended in a day or two, and that frivolous-minded crowd would forget that they had ever met the handsome stranger by the margin of the silver stream. The chaplet slipped from Nita's hair. The yellow flowers lay unheeded in her lap. Under cover of them the king possessed himself of her hand. Her little fingers lay unresistingly in his.

"Sweetheart," he murmured, "don't be unkind. This is a glimpse of paradise to me. Ah, you little realise what a drab existence has been mine. I know you won't spoil it."

"Why should I not?" Nita whispered.

"Because it is going to last," the king said solemnly. "Dear heart, do you think I am going back now? Do you think that I would return to Montenegro without you? No, not for the reversion of a score of crowns. I mean to have a real queen not a human puppet trained from the cradle to be an automaton and a figure head."

Nita sighed gently. The whole thing was wildly extravagant to the last degree, but it held something real for her. Her lips trembled in a smile. It seemed as if she were about to say something warm and palpitating, when a burst of laughter from those gathered round the tea table drowned her voice.

"Oh, I assure you it is true," Clarette cried. "Nita told us so. Think of the audacity of it! None of us ever conceived such a gilded lie. Behold him! Let me introduce you to his Majesty, the King of Montenegro."

A little man in gleaming spectacles had come up and joined the group. He was a veritable note of exclamation. With a shrewd little smile on his lips now he ceased to play with his waxed moustache. There was something like consternation on his face.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "Why, this is actually——"

"What is the matter?" Clarette demanded shortly. "Boys and girls, here is Louis Benin actually lost for speech. The brilliant journalist, whose mission it is to govern Europe is actually embarrassed. Dear little man, have you ever been in the presence of Royalty before? Give him a glass of water, one of you."

The spick and span journalist forced a smile to his lips. He ceased to stare at the owner of a throne as if he had been some rare and curious animal. His snug self-complacency was coming back to him now.

"There is a likeness to his Majesty," he said. "Ha, ha, that is a good joke of Nita's. I did not know that this was one of her *metiers*. I hope you are well, sir."

The little journalist was swaggering now. He was apparently quite at his ease. Yet, there was a restlessness about him, and a queer glitter in his eyes which filled Nita with uneasiness.

"That man has recognised you," she whispered.

"It is more than possible," the king said coolly. "Indeed, I wonder that some of your companions have not already done so. I suppose they did not spot me out of one of those confounded uniforms that I am always decked in. But why so grave? Who is the little man, and how can he harm any of us?"

"He is a journalist," Nita explained, "and a very brilliant one, too. Everything he says is listened to; in fact he is quite a prominent figure here. I don't know what is passing through his mind, but assuredly he recognised you. I should not feel so anxious if he had not kept the fact to himself. You see, there is Bertha Venis telling him that there is an understanding between you and me. Oh, I wish she wouldn't. I wish we had never come here to-day."

There was another burst of laughter from the group round the table. One or two of the girls had laid hands upon the newspaper man, and were trying to detain him. He was desolate, he said. He was distracted to tear himself away from such pleasant company.

"I only looked in for a moment," he said. "After the theatre, this evening, perhaps. Meanwhile, the slave of duty as I am, I must hurry back to the city. Au-revoir."

The shining light of the fourth estate hastened back to the city. He hurried along the boulevards in the direction of his office. People smiled and bowed, while a man more emphatic than the rest tried to detain him. But he shook him off and went his way.

"Is it so important?" the other asked. "Is there a fortune waiting at the office of *La Cigale* for you?"

"Something like it," Benin cried gaily. "Fortune? Yes; if it is served up hot enough. And exclusive, my friend, exclusive! Come to me to supper at the Cafe Continental after the Theatre to-night, and I promise you a feast of the gods with the wine of the widow galore. But not if you detain me, Alphonse."

TO BE CONTINUED.