

stirred faintly, but that was all. Rutzstin was the only one that remained standing.

"Seize him!" the king commanded. "And see that he is safely bound."

The queen covered her face with her hands. It all seemed like some horrible dream. She had never expected her plan to be so swiftly and terribly successful as this. Bloodshed had formed no part of her programme. And yet the evil thing had been absolutely necessary—it had been forced upon her by the treachery of the conspirators.

What she wanted now was to get away from it all. If Rusta, on bended knees, came to her to-morrow and implored her to stay she would refuse. And the whole thing was so terribly grotesque. Even as she stood there, in the face of this hideous slaughter, she could hear Clarette's clear, mocking voice and the laughter and applause of the heedless audience. Were there any traitors amongst them, she wondered?

"This is no place for you, my wife," the king said tenderly.

"But there is nowhere else I can go," Nita protested. "Look at me! Would not my face betray me instantly. It is terrible, but I must remain."

There was no word for it after that. Clearly the glittering audience in the theatre suspected nothing. All had been done in that moment of noise and bustle on the stage. The curtain would come down presently, and the royal guests would disperse to the various reception-rooms till supper was announced. They would not expect the actors for the best part of an hour or more. And by that time—

Rutzstin stood there stolid and apparently indifferent. It was only the uneasy glitter in his eye that betrayed him.

"You murderous dog," the king said sternly, "we have to thank you for all this. It is a year since you set out designedly to poison the minds of our subjects against us. I must congratulate you upon the way in which you have done your work. I have been held up as a pleasure-seeking fool, with the one object of gratifying my desires at the expense of my people. My consort of a frivolous-minded actress who cared nothing for the man she had infatuated. And yet, you Judas, she planned all this. Directly she realised that we were prisoners in our own palace, she set her wits to work to get the best of you. And though you are a cunning old fox, she has done it. A score of the blackest-hearted ruffians in Montenegro lie there, and lie there justly. There may be scores of others ready to take their places, but that is a matter of indifference to us now, seeing we are not going to remain. If you were not an old man, I would strip your uniform from your back and flog you round the ramparts of the castle."

"I have done no more than my duty," Rutzstin said doggedly.

The king turned away with a gesture of disgust.

"I am wasting time in arguing with you," he said. "Take him away and lock him up in one of the cells. He will be found sooner or later and released by his friends. After to-night he can plot and scheme as much as he likes. Take him away."

Rutzstin was smuggled out, his eyes glaring malignantly. Then the orchestra burst suddenly into the national anthem of Montenegro. The players trooped from the stage. With a gesture the king ordered the ante-room to be cleared.

"See that the doors are properly locked," he commanded. "This is no place for women. Oh, yes, my friends, the scheme has been a bril-



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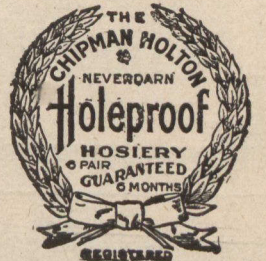
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