



A Mummer's Throne

A New Serial by the Author of "The Sun-Dial," etc.

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CHAPTER I.

A ROYAL MOUSE.

THE Asturian Ambassador had been giving a garden party, and most of the guests were still there. The great majority of those present had come to meet the young King of Montenegro. Taking it as a whole, the monarch in question had come up to their expectations.

There is always a certain flavour of romance hanging like a purple mist upon a palace, and there was an added perfume in the case of Fritz of Montenegro because he had come westward with the avowed purpose of seeking a wife. As everybody knows, Montenegro is a pocket kingdom, lying between Russia and Turkey. For the rest, it is mountainous and picturesque, somewhat poverty-stricken and given over at times to the spirit of revolution.

Nevertheless, a wise administration contrived to rule the country fairly well and replenish the king's priy purse annually to the extent of some two hundred and fifty thousand pounds. Seeing that his Majesty boasted an army of twenty thousand men, and a navy of three dubious cruisers, and a brace of obsolete gunboats, he was fairly an eligible *parti* as things go in these hard times. As to the rest, he was handsome in a clean-shaven, boyish way, which was more suggestive of Oxford and Cambridge and the Outer Bar than of the romantic possessor of a Crown and the last representative of a set of picturesque and undeniably cut-throat ancestors. Many fair breasts had fluttered when King Fritz's mission first became known, and most of the Chancelleries of Europe were mildly agitated. For, after all is said and done, the State of Montenegro had its interests, and it has been a bone of contention at more than one international conference.

In accordance with the eternal fitness of things, the king had not come alone. His watch dog was not far off in the shape of General Count Rutzstin. Every student of history knows the name of that distinguished warrior, and the important part he has played in the past in the story of the Balkan Peninsula. He stood now talking to a distinguished personage, and the subject of their conversation was the future of Montenegro and its ruler.

"A grave responsibility, your Excellency," the count said thoughtfully. "A most charming young man, certainly. But, of course, young men will be young men, you know. And—er—well, it is rather dull in our capital."

"The prince is a great sportsman, general?" the personage murmured. "At least, so I have heard."

"Oh, dear, yes. I am afraid his English education is responsible for that. Of course, you know the boy was at Harrow. He was accompanied there by Prince Florizel Arcana, his cousin. But, no doubt, years will bring a sense of responsibility. Apart from that, his Majesty has been most carefully brought up, and in many respects he is little more than a child."

The great personage smiled blandly.

"As a constitutional monarch should be," he said. "Content, no doubt, to leave everything to the

wise heads of his ministers. That is as it should be, seeing that his father—"

The general coughed discreetly, and the personage hastened to change the subject of conversation, for without risk of *lese majeste*, the less said about the past of King Fritz's immediate progenitor the better. The old soldier's face was grave and stern now. His great grey moustache bristled. For, if report speaks truly, Count Rutzstin had anything but a rosy time during the late reign. And if the count had any ambitions of his own, he kept them entirely to himself. He stood there erect and upright on the grass, his face half in the shadow of the budding trees. It seemed to the personage that a greyer pallor was creeping over the old man's features.

"You are not well, count," he said anxiously.

"The old trouble, your Excellency," the count replied. "I have never recovered from that cut over the head I got at Sarspruit. A slight pressure on the brain, you know. What the doctors call a compression. I only hope and pray—"

What plea was in the old man's mind was never uttered, for he suddenly collapsed on the grass and lay there a huddled heap of scarlet and gold lace, his grey face turned up to the sky. There was a shudder and confusion amongst the guests, and immediately a score of them clustered round the unconscious figure. There were gay summer frocks amongst the mass of grey coats and uniforms, and a lady on the edge of the crowd turned away and shivered.

"How dreadful," she exclaimed, "how very dreadful!"

"How confoundedly lucky!" the man by her side muttered.

She turned upon him with reproach in her grey eyes.

"Does your Majesty really mean that?" she asked.

Fritz, King of Montenegro, blushed to the roots of his fair hair. It was well, perhaps, that no society paragraphist was present.

"You don't understand, marquise," he stammered. "Honestly, I am very fond of old Rutzstin, but he is a regular old martinet all the same. On the whole, I was better off when I was at school. And, really, there is very little the matter with the old man. He gets these queer attacks every now and then, which absolutely prostrate him for the time being. But they never last more than a day or two. Ah, you can see for yourself that he is better already."

The little gaudy group separated, and Rutzstin staggered into the Embassy in the arms of his host. The old warrior looked very pale and ghastly now in the light of the sun. His cunning, clever face was a mass of tiny wrinkles like the rind of a melon. Yet, there was no suggestion of anxiety on the face of his sovereign; indeed, a close observer might have said that he appeared to be pleased about something. One of the Embassy's secretaries came up to King Fritz at the same moment.

"This is a dreadful thing, your Majesty," he murmured. "His Excellency, the doctor, is now

with the general. Will you kindly command us what to do?"

"Take him home and put him to bed," the King of Montenegro said promptly. "All he wants is a nurse, and some crushed ice at the back of his head. Give him a couple of days in bed and he will be as well as ever again. That is all."

The secretary turned away, and the king strolled off in the direction of one of the little tea-tables as if the whole thing were a matter of every-day occurrence. There was a certain look of expectation on his keen, boyish face. He twisted his slight moustache joyously. He looked less like a king now than a smart, well-set-up young Englishman turned out by a complacent and conscientious Bond Street tailor. Seated at one of the little tables was his *alter ego* sipping coffee and smoking an Egyptian cigarette. The other young man rose and bowed profoundly as the king came up to his table.

Republicans and people of that kind who have no reverence for royalty would have declared that the king so far forgot himself as to wink at his companion.

"Here is a joke, Florizel," he murmured. "Old Rutzstin is knocked up. Got one of his old attacks, as far as I can judge."

"A serious matter, your Majesty," Prince Florizel murmured.

"Oh, Majesty be hanged!" the king said. "What is the good of keeping it up when there is on one about to hear? Don't you understand what this thing means to us?"

Prince Florizel so far forgot himself as to smile. "Possibly a breaking off of diplomatic relations," he observed. "Negotiations with the Princess of Austenburg—"

"If you mention her again, I'll land you one in the eye," the king exclaimed. "I don't care a rap what Rutzstin says. What is the good of an impregnable frontier to me so long as I am tied to a wife who weighs twelve stone and has a complexion like a decayed orange. No, my boy, when I marry I am going to please myself."

"What is the good of being king if you can't pick and choose? Now let us trot along and see that the old chap is comfortable, and then we will proceed to enjoy ourselves. I am sick of all this bowing and scraping and being dragged about as if I were some puppet in a show. Here am I, at the age of twenty-five, knowing no more of life and with little or no more experience than I had when I left school. I used to say that our Harrow experiences were the happiest in our days, and upon my word, I believe I was right."

"You won't do anything rash," the prince said anxiously. "You see, with our aged general laid up—"

"My dear Florizel, this is our opportunity. The old man will be incapable of doing anything for the next two or three days, and we could not have a better excuse for putting off all the functions that these good people have arranged for us. Besides, look how it will add to our popularity. Picture us giving up all the joys of life to sit by the bedside of the man who made Montenegro what it is. Think of the reams of gush in the papers, when all the while, my dear Florizel, we shall be sipping the delights of this queen of cities. Florizel, I am going to go it!"

The prince was wise in his day and generation, but he was young. Moreover, he was not entirely averse to going it himself. But, still, the sense of responsibility was upon him now, and the knowledge of it clouded his youthful ingenuous features.

"You won't rub it in too thick?" he said anxiously.

"No more than royal purple," the king laughed. "Or, perhaps, a deep vermillion. But now come along and make your excuses. As for the rest, is it not on the knees of the gods?"

CHAPTER II.

"A MERE PLAYER."

THE physicians' account of the condition of General Rutzstin was not in the least disturbing. The aged warrior was suffering from a compression which was merely a matter of time. He had to be kept perfectly quiet for a day or two, during which period it would be indiscreet to worry him with the affairs of state. And, indeed, the count was on the happy borderland when nothing matters, and even the dinning clash of nations comes dull and muffled to the ear. To all this the young king listened with resignation. Besides, he had seen his beloved chancellor in similar case many times before. That war-scarred old body was by no means exhausted yet, and, doubtless, Count Rutzstin would live to weather many a plot and storm yet.

With his mind easy and his brain full of eager