



# A Mummer's Throne

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

By FRED. M. WHITE

## RESUME

The young King Fritz, ruler of the pocket Kingdom of Montenegro lying between Russia and Turkey, is touring abroad with his cousin and a watchful guardian in the person of the distinguished warrior, General Count Rutzstin. A sudden attack of illness which overtakes the Count relieves the young monarch for a time from his guardian's vigilance, and he proceeds to take advantage of his newly acquired liberty. Attending the theatre one night the susceptible young ruler becomes enamoured of the heroine of the piece, and on making her acquaintance finds that Nita Reinhardt is even a more fascinating person in private life than on the stage, and soon realises that he is falling seriously in love with her. For some time he manages to see her often, and also to keep his identity a secret from the public, although the girl knows who he is, having been born in Montenegro herself. One day however a journalist of Nita's acquaintance recognises the King, and delighted with the thought that he has stumbled over a story containing so much romantic interest hastens off to make the most of his "find." The evening edition of *La Cigale* contains a full account of the adventures of the King and his attachment for the charming Nita. It only tends to strengthen His Majesty's determination to make the girl his wife and a secret marriage is arranged. On the same night an attempt is made by some of Rutzstin's men to kidnap the King. It is frustrated however, by the young monarch's presence of mind and later he and Nita proceed to a little chapel in the out-skirts of the city where a priest has promised to marry them. The ceremony is scarcely concluded when a loud knocking is heard at the door and Count Rutzstin and his followers enter. The King presents to them the newly made Queen of Montenegro.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE FIERCE LIGHT ON THE THRONE.

**H**IGH up above the town the fortress-palace gleamed with lights. It stood over Rusta like a flashing tiara on the dusky hair of a queen. A great dance was in progress at the palace, and most of Montenegro's chivalry had gathered there. The streets of the capital were quiet for the most part; there was a powder of stars in the blue dome overhead. In the oleanders and myrtles a drifting tangle of fireflies glistened. Away beyond the fertile plain was the sea, and occasionally far out the flinging rays of a revolving lantern from the lighthouse on Martyr Island. Assuredly a happy country this!

Inside were thousands of glistening electric globes under pink shades clustered on the silver electroliers, strings and ropes of roses, a tangle of fern and foliage against the polished oak of the ancient walls, the dull flash of armour here and there. Here were pictures of dead-and-gone rulers of Montenegro, makers of history before this age of luxury commenced, and before the stone-flagged passages were littered with rare Persian rugs like tinted rose-leaves in a Persian garden.

Surely the queen of all this should be a happy woman! It was a year to-night since she had come here first, blushing and palpitating with her new honours thick upon her! The nebulous dream of the throne had become a breathing reality! A year to-night King Fritz had stood by the side of his bride on the terrace yonder listening to the hoarse roar of the cheers from below uprising from beneath the smoke of the swinging torches. He had seen old Rutzstin grim and forbidding in the background, a figure of ill omen. It had seemed nothing then—to-night the king was not so sure. . . .

He was in the midst of his guests, upstanding, handsome, a smile upon his face. He had learnt how to smile though his heart was heavy within him and the shadow of the coming trouble kept him awake of nights. The atmosphere was warm and heavy, the music made by the band concealed behind a bank of azalias suggested love in idleness. There was a constant ebb and flow of silks and laces and foaming garments suggestive of a sea under the summer sunshine.

King Fritz turned his back upon it somewhat impatiently. Would the queen never tire of all this gilded frivolity? The last three months had been one delirious whirl of gaiety; there had been no time to think. Was that the same woman yonder, the woman with the tiara blazing in the wonder of her piled-up hair, the same gentle, timid creature that he had wooed and won amongst the primroses in the woods of Arcady? There was some proverb as to the setting up of a beggar on horseback, and—but that was not a pleasant thought. How had it all happened, how had they drifted apart? There had been no quarrel, no coolness, and yet it seemed to King Fritz that he was looking at his consort as if she were standing on a distant continent.

She could not see the peril coming, she did not realise for a moment that they were both little better than prisoners in this splendid cage. Well, let it go on—let her enjoy herself whilst there was yet time. Old Rutzstin would strike when the hour came. There was a whisper, too, that Schenteim was in Rusta, and that he and Rutzstin were working hand and glove together. The seeds of disaffection had been sown in the provinces, the name of the queen had become a byword of extravagance and folly, and—

**S**OMEBODY was pushing a folded scrap of paper into the king's palm. He turned to see little Clarette of the Odeon Theatre before him. There was gladness and mocking laughter in her eyes, yet she laid a warning finger on her lips. As a matter of fact, most of the Odeon company were here. There was a dramatic performance to-morrow night in the castle theatre, and two thousand guests had been bidden to the performance. The play was by the queen herself, and she had summoned her old comrades from Asturia to take part in it.

What would become of all these butterflies before long, Fritz asked himself. The blow might fall at any time, the revolution be proclaimed to-night. There was tragedy red and stark lurking in the shadows of the city. There were those amongst Schenteim's followers who had sworn that the queen should never leave Montenegro alive.

Some frothy nonsense broke from Clarette's red lips as she passed on. King Fritz opened the scrap of paper and read the message surreptitiously.

"The little cabinet behind the throne-room at two o'clock," it ran. "Don't fail me."

The hour was near at hand. Rutzstin had vanished for the moment. Usually those keen old eyes were not far away. The king strode aimlessly along the long flower-decked corridor till he came to the deserted throne-room. The cabinet behind was hung with tapestry, the windows looked sheer down to the distant roadway. Once a hillman had climbed that precipice, and with the aid of a dagger had changed the dynasty.

Fritz stood there gloomily waiting. He touched the switches and flooded the room with light. Then the door was flung open, and the queen came in. She hesitated just a moment, a pink flush rose to her cheeks. Heavens, how beautiful she looked! The radiant loveliness had refined, the figure had expanded, the eyes were more clear and lustrous. In her gleaming white she looked every inch a queen. The golden wonder of her hair was crowned by a flashing diadem of stones.

"I—I thought that I should find you here," she said. "Rutzstin has gone?"

"I am not his keeper," Fritz said sullenly.

"Could he with truth say the same thing of you?" the queen retorted.

Fritz flushed to his eyes. How callous she had grown! She had ceased to care for him, she had never cared for him! She had merely been dazzled by the splendid prospect that he had held out to her. Well, let her make the most of her time.

"Do you understand what you are saying?" he asked.

"I think so," she said. "Oh, you think that I am a fool, a little brainless butterfly, content to flit in the sunshine and heedless of the morrow. You think our marriage was a mistake—"

"It is no matter of speculation, madame—I am certain of it."

There was something cold and cutting in the words. The queen reeled before them as if they had been a dagger in that dazzling white breast of hers. The beautiful face grew pale. She half turned away, sorely wounded, then she paused.

"You are cruel, cruel," she whispered. "You do not understand. I could have left you long ago had I wished. I could have taken away with me the fortune that lies in my jewel-cases. When I first saw the danger, I might have left you to your fate. But I stayed because—because I loved you, Fritz. Do you think that I am blind to the danger? Do you suppose I do not know what is going to happen? I stayed to share your fate—"

"You stayed to share my fate! You! What are you afraid of?"

"Afraid! I am not afraid. It is you that I am thinking of. I could die by your side, but I do not want to live without you. And yet you are right—our marriage has been a mistake. My beautiful dream ended before I had been here a month. Your people refused to take me seriously. In their eyes I was a mere scheming adventuress, or a silly doll come here to play the leading lady in a comic opera. Their minds had been poisoned by the agents of old Rutzstin. That man is a fanatic, he is mad. He has dreamt of allying Montenegro to Bergia by your marriage till the thing is a monomania with him. If you fall, then your cousin Sergius comes to the throne and Rutzstin's dream is a reality. To bring this about he would not scruple to murder both of us."

The king stood listening in amazement. He had guessed all this—he knew it, and more. But that those facts should be so familiar to the woman standing there!

"Who told you all about this?" he asked. "I thought—"

"Oh, I knew exactly what you thought! Have I not eyes? Is there anything the matter with my hearing? But I thought you didn't care. I thought that you were given over to mere pleasures, to your dogs and hares and your guns. And in all these unhappy months—"

"Unhappy! You? I give you my word of honour that I regarded you—"

"And we have both been mistaken! Ah, well; it is hard in an atmosphere like this for the flower of love to thrive! And yet I did my best. I tried so hard to show your people that their interests were mine. We seem to have drifted into a tangle of frivolous amusements, to live for nothing else. And our enemies are pointing the finger of scorn at us. It is all Rutzstin's doing, every bit. And we are prisoners here at Rutzstin's good will and pleasure. When he is ready, Schenteim will strike the blow. It will be a case of Serbia over again—perhaps."

"It would be cowardly to leave it—dear."

The queen's face lighted in a tender smile. Her face glowed.

"Why?" she asked. "What do you gain by the martyr's crown? If we could get away! Fritz, if you have any love still left for me—"

The king took a stride forward. He caught the dazzling figure in his arms, he bent down and pressed his lips to the quivering mouth of his consort. They could catch faintly the dreamy music in the distance, they were in a world of their own for a moment.

"I could bless this chance," Fritz murmured. "Fool that I was ever to doubt you! And I saw all this coming! I did not care because—well, because I thought that you did not care! And now it is too late. The wolves are all about us, the city is full of them. I believe that Rutzstin has gone off now to meet Schenteim. I could have met them with my back to the wall. But not now, not now! To hold you in my arms again makes a coward of me. I cannot lose the happiness that I can read in your eyes, my sweet! Mark you, I made no mistake—"

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