



# A Mummer's Throne

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

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## CHAPTER III.

LE ROI S'AMUSE.

THE hope of Montenana went off, clean shaven and flannelled and immaculate to his destruction. As in duty bound, Prince Florizel made something in the way of a protest, but the thing lacked conviction, and the king merely smiled. Was not he released from bondage now? Was not Rutzstin still imprisoned in his darkened room? Besides, it was perfect May weather, and all the world was sweet and young and fair.

"There will be a devil of a row presently," Prince Florizel said. "Really, old chap, you are going it, you know."

The king turned up his moustache complacently. "Oh, I know it," he said. "My dear Florizel, this is the chance of a lifetime. Besides, it isn't likely to last long. And she really is the dearest, sweetest, most fascinating—"

Prince Florizel went off hastily. He had heard a good deal of the adjective complimentary for the last day or two. Besides, he was young himself, and he had his own dish of little fish to fry. So the king went off into the heart of the sweet May morning, whistling blithely, as gallant a specimen of a young gentleman as the heart of shy maiden would like to meet in a day's march. There was nothing about him regal now. He was not borne down by the spirit of his ancestors. He was merely a healthy, wholesome young man, very much in love and bent upon making a fool of himself without the least possible delay.

So it came about presently that he and Nita Reinhardt were drifting down a silver stream under the shadow of the city walls out into the shade of the woods where the bluebells lay like a carpet, and the air was faint with the smell of pale primroses. It was nothing to King Fritz now that in yon frowning tower an ancestor of his had been put to death. It was nothing to him that another progenitor had set siege to that fair city, and carried it at the point of the sword. He had forgotten his pedigree, his ambitions and expectations, he had even forgotten grim old Rutzstin himself. It was impossible that he should remember these trivial things, or recollect the sighs of hopeless princesses whilst he was looking into the fathomless blue eyes of his companion. He did not know and, incidentally, he did not care that certain rumours were floating about the cheap press, and that already some enterprising journalist had proclaimed the fact that the ruler of Montenana was missing. What did it all matter?

They drifted on and on down the bosom of the shining silver stream till they came at length to the place where they were going to lunch. It was a fairy meal altogether, the kind of feast that Oberon and Titania might have sat down to what time Puck stood slyly by and made fun of them. And when it did come to an end they went back to the boat again, and floated on between the level meadows down to Camelot, or so it seemed to King Fritz. It was enough for him that he should lie there on those silken cushions listening to the voice of his companion. And then he began to sketch out

plans for the future, whereupon the little actress sighed.

"Do you object?" the king asked anxiously.

"Object, why should I? But it is altogether nonsense, delicious nonsense, but nonsense all the same. Have you already forgotten your hopes and aspirations?"

"I did not know that I had any," the king replied.

"Why, of course, you have. You would be the first of your name if you hadn't. Think of the possibilities of life before you! You are young and brave and clever. You are the first popular ruler that Montenana has ever had. Under your guidance she may be a great country some day. I shall want to feel proud of the old place. It will be a great joy to me if anything I said encouraged you."

The king glanced at the sweet, grave face.

"What do you know of Montenana?" he asked.

"I was born there," Nita went on. "It is my native place. My father lived up in the mountains beyond Rusta where he had a farm. Some time when I know you better I will tell you the history of my life. But not just yet."

"Tell it me now," the king commanded. "It is not for a subject of mine to speak to me in that fashion. And so you are of the same country as myself. Well, I am glad to know that. It will be a pleasant surprise for my people one of these days."

"Don't they know it already?" Nita asked, with a demure smile. "But they are a simple people, and would have but little sympathy with a life like mine. Some day, when you are married, your wife might be amused when you tell her of this episode. But I am talking nonsense now. I have been thinking about you, and I see now that I had no right to come on these expeditions at all."

"Why not?" the king asked eagerly. "Don't you feel safe with me? Because I happen to be born to a throne, am I to be deprived of all pleasures? Besides, I shall never marry now unless—"

Discretion stood by the king's elbow for a moment. Perhaps he was conscious that he was going just a little too far. But the scent of the spring was in his blood now. The air was fragrant with the subtlety of the primrose.

"I won't marry one of those women," he declared vehemently. "Why should I be hawked about Europe like this? Why should I have to consult Russia and Austria and Germany before I can make my choice? And between ourselves, my dear child, these princesses are a pretty commonplace lot. When I marry I shall please myself, just as my great ancestor, King Boris, did. Didn't he marry a shepherd maiden, and didn't they found Montenana between them? Besides, we want some good healthy blood in our veins. We are getting feeble and anæmic. Oh, my child, what a queen you would make yourself!"

Nita hardly appeared to be listening. But the last few words touched her and fired her imagination. A subtle pink flush came over her cheeks, her blue eyes appeared to be far away. And why not? she asked herself. Kings and queens are only mortals like other people. They are swayed by the same passions and impulses originally. They had come from the same stock as herself in the good old days when might was right, and the sword had the

last argument kings were commonplace enough.

And she could do it; she knew that. She would have no fear of the future before her eyes. Her little foot would be pressed firmly enough upon the footsteps of a throne. She would tenderly guard the best interests of her people. And why should she not be a queen? The suggestion of the romance fired her. Her heart was beating faster now. Her breath came quickly through her parted lips. And such a king, too! Any woman would be happy with the present ruler of Montenana. With a sudden impulse she bent forward and brushed her hand softly, almost caressingly over the king's crisp, brown curls. He thrilled to the touch of those moist, cool fingers. They stirred him to a sudden energy.

"Don't do that," he said. "At least, I mean it is dangerous. We are very good friends, Nita."

"The very best of friends," Nita murmured.

"Very well, then. Why shouldn't we set an example? Why must I go from court to court until I find the passable woman with whom I might manage to live? There is something horrible about the whole business, something so cold-blooded and commercial. And, then, all the papers will gush and scream and cackle over King Fritz of Montenana and his love match. They will photograph me and paragraph me, and when I part from my future queen they will swear that my eyes are wet. So they will be with tears—of laughter."

Nita smiled under her long lashes.

"Is it as bad as all that?" she asked.

"Worse," the king said gloomily. "I tell you, I won't have it—I won't put up with it! What difference does it make to the Chancellaries of Europe whom I marry? What is the good of being a king if one can't please oneself? Besides, it is easily managed. And once I am married according to the laws of our church, who is there who could part us?"

"I am afraid you are talking great nonsense," Nita smiled. "It would never do. Besides, the queen you have in your mind is impossible, she does not exist."

"She does exist," the king cried. "She is here at this moment. Ah! my sweetheart, it is not for you to pretend you do not know what I mean. I can read your knowledge in your eyes and the colour on your beautiful cheek. Besides, I am no headstrong boy who does not know his own mind. I am twenty-five. I shall have all the world before me. And what more would you have? Let people say what they please. You should not laugh. Remember that I am offering you all that I possess. What more could I say?"

"The throne," Nita faltered, "the crown?"

"Aye, everything," the king said passionately. "The throne, the crown, my heart and home. Before Heaven, you were born to be a queen—the fairest and best and sweetest that ever helped to rule over a fortunate and delighted people. They will worship you. Ah! they have a fine eye for beauty, those dogs of Montenana. And why should it not be, Nita? Why do you smile when you see that I speak from the bottom of my heart? And the thing is so easy, so simple. The world need not know until after we are married. And then, what matters what the people say?"

She should have checked him. She should have reproved him. She knew that perfectly well. But she sat there smiling and quivering with the suggestion of tears in her deep fringed eyes. She let him clasp her hand, and carry it passionately to his lips. She was only a girl after all to whom fortune had come swiftly and unexpectedly. She was floating down the stream of life, and not swimming as the more experienced do. There was something sweetly subtle to her in the flattery of the king, in the knowledge that this brave young man who lay at her feet controlled the destinies of a free and enlightened people. And he loved her, too. There was no doubt of that. She needed no lessons, no finishing hints in the art of coquetry to tell her this. She could read the admiration in the king's eyes, she could feel it in the grip of his fingers. And she could be a queen, too. Had she not displayed the fact nightly to a score of delighted audiences? In imagination she could see her way now through all the difficulties and dangers that lay in her path till her foot was planted firmly upon the footstool of a throne, and she had compelled a nation to love her despite themselves.

"You cannot mean it," she whispered.

"Sweetheart, you know I do. You know that I was never more serious in my life. And why not? You are good. You are beautiful. You are all that Heaven allows woman to be. Before God, I could not commit the blasphemy of a loveless marriage now. I swear I would rather abdicate and leave the throne to my cousin. What would it be to go back to Montenana without you?"

He was pleading wildly and passionately now,