THE PUPPET CROWN.

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SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

A little kingdom in Eastern Europe is hopelessly in debt. Should consols for 5,000,000 crowns be presented for payment when they fall due the crown will pass from King Leopold to the Duchess of Auersperg, his foe. The bonds are in the possession of Lord Fitzgerald, an Englishman, who has promised his father to save the King and his daughter, the Princess Alexia, by not presenting the consols for payment. Prince Frederick of Carnavia also offers his fortune to pay the debt, on the day of his marriage to Alexia. But, on the way to the wedding he vanishes. The Duchess, who wants to ruin the King by getting the consols, kidnaps Fitzgerald and his friend, Maurice Carewe, a young American diplomat, and carries them from Bielberg, the capital of the kingdom, to the Red Chateau, one of her own estates. Maurice recognizes her as the Duchess; Fitzgerald does not. She makes Fitzgerald fall in love with her. For love of her he promises to give the Duchess the consols. Maurice is sent to Bielberg to get them, only to find that they have been mysteriously stolen from their hiding-place. They have been stolen by a spy named Kopf, who holds them for reward. Col. Beauvais, commander of Leopold's body guard, is secretly aiding the Duchess. He is an exiled Austrian Prince around whom a mystery hovers. Maurice, at a diplomatic reception, wins attention from the Princess, to the exclusion of Beauvais. He accepts Beauvais's invitation to visit the Colonel's rooms.

There he recognizes Beauvais as a criminal over whom extradition papers are out. He is forced into a duel by Beauvais, whom he disarms.

Maurice returns to the Red Chateau where the Duchess, believing him to have stolen the consols, has him arrested.

He escapes and starts back toward Bielberg. On the way he overtakes Prince Frederick of Carnavia, whom the Duchess has kidnapped to prevent his marrying Alexia and saving the Kingdom.

The army of the Duchess also prepares to march on Bielberg to win the throne by force.

The King's army marches to repel the Duchess but is betrayed by its officers, and in a body goes over to the enemy. Maurice starts back to Bielberg to warn the Princess. Beauvais gives chase.

He and Maurice fight. Maurice is badly wounded, but kills Beauvais. Maurice reaches the palace at Bielberg, tells his story and sinks speechless on the floor of the room. Soon after the Duchess and her army reach the palace.

There they learn that King Leopold has just died. Maurice, delirious and dying, confronts them in the throne-room. From his words there Alexia learns he loves her.

CHAPTER XV.

Darkness and Dawn.

MADAME, surrounded by her staff and courtiers, sat in the main salon of the Continental Hotel, waiting for the Archbishop. Two men alone in the throng failed to overwhelm her with adulation and praise. On the face of one rested a moody scowl; on the other, agony and remorse. These two men were Col. Mollendorf and Lord Fitzgerald. The same thought occupied each mind: the scene in the throne room.

Presently an orderly announced: "Monseigneur, the Archbishop."

The old prelate entered.

"Monseigneur," she began, "I have come into my own at last. But for you and your ambitious schemes, all this would not have come to pass. You robbed my father of his throne and set your puppet there instead. By trickery my father was robbed of his lawful inheritance. By trickery I was compelled to regain it.'

"Listen to me, Madame," interposed the Archbishop, "for I have something to say to you which will cause you some reflection.

"King Leopold was the dupe of Austria, as you are at this moment, Madame. So long as Leopold reigned peacefully he was not to be disturbed. Had you shown patience and resignation, doubtless to-day you would be queen. You will never be more than a duchess.

"Madame, you have done exactly as Austria intended you should. There is no longer any kingdom." There was a subdued triumph in his eyes. "To you," with a gesture toward the courtiers and office-seekers, "to you I shall say, your own blind self-interest has destroyed you. Madame, you are bearing arms not against this kingdom, but against Austria, since from to-day this land becomes the property of the imperial crown. If you struggle, it will be futilely. For, by this move of yours Austria will declare that this kingdom is a menace to the tranquility of the confederation. Madame, there is no corner-stone to your edifice. This is what I wished to say to you. I have done. Permit me to withdraw."

For a moment his auditors were spellbound; then all the emotions of the mind and heart portrayed themselves on the circle of faces. Madame's face alone was inscrutable.

"His Excellency, the Austrian Ambassador!" announced the orderly.

The archbishop bowed and left the apartment.

"Your Highness," began the Austrian, "His Imperial Majesty commands you immediate evacuation of Bielberg, and that you delay not your departure to the frontier. This kingdom is a crown land. It shall remain so by the consent of the confederation. If you refuse to obey this injunction, an army will enforce the order. Believe me, Madame, this office is distasteful to me, but it was not avoidable. What disposition am I to submit to his Majesty?

"Monsieur," she said, "I am without choice in the matter. To pit my forces against the Emperor's would be neither politic nor sensible. I submit." There was not a sign of any emotion, no hint of the terrible wrath which lay below the surface of those politely modulated tones. But it seemed to her as she stood there, the object of all eyes, that some part of her soul had died. Her pride surmounted the humiliation, the pride of a woman and a princess. She would show no weakness to the world.

"Then, Madame," said the Ambassador, suppressing the admiration in his eyes at this evidence of royal nonchalance, "I shall inform His Majesty at once."

When he had gone, Madame turned coldly to her stricken followers. "Messieurs the fortunes of war are not on our side. I thank you for your services. Now leave me; I wish to be alone."

One by one they filed out into the corridors.

Madame sat down, laid her face on her arms and wept.

Fitzgerald stepped from behind one of the curtains.

She sprang to her feet, her eyes blazing.

"You?" she cried. "You? You have dared to hide that you might witness my weakness and my tears? You. . ."

"Madame!"

"Go! I hate you!"

"Ah, Madame, we always hate those whom we have wronged. Do not forget that I love you, with a love that pleases convention."

Madame forgot her vanished dreams; the bitterness in her heart subsided. That mysterious, indefinable thrill, which every woman experiences when a boundless love is laid at her feet passed through her, heaving her sensible to a delicious languor.

Nobility, she thought, was based on the observance of certain laws. Around the central star were lesser stars, from which the central star drew its radiance. Whenever one of these stars deviates from its orbit, the glory of the central star is diminished. To accept the love of the Englishman would be a blow to the pride of Austria. She smiled.

"Monsieur," she said, in a hesitating voice, "Monsieur, I am indeed a woman. You ask me if I can forget that I offered you my lips? No. Nor do I wish to. Why did I permit you to kiss me? I do not know. I could not analyze the impulse if I tried. Monsieur, I am a woman who demands much from those who serve her. I am capricious; my moods vary; I am unfamiliar with sentiment; I hate oftener than I love. Listen. There is a canker in my heart, made there by vanity. When it heals—well—maybap you will find the woman you desire. Mind you, I make no promises. Follow me, if you will, but have patience, love me if you must, but in silence," and with a gesture which was not without a certain fondness, she laid her hand upon his head.

* * *

In the Princess's own chamber they carried Maurice and laid him on the white bed. Was would she have it. She looked down at Maurice; there was no sign of life save in the fitful drawing in of the nether lip. She dampened a cloth and wiped the sweat of agony from the marble brow.

"Oh, if he might live!" she cried. "Will he, will he?"

"No, Your Highness," said the physician. "He has perhaps an hour. Extraordinary vitality alone is the cause of his existence so long. He has lost nearly all the blood in his body. His wound is frightful wound. He is dying; but he may return to consciousness before the end."

The Archbishop, with sombre eyes, contemplated the pale, handsome face which lay motionless against the pillow. Was he wrong in what he adopted in favor of the dying man. How many times had that face accompanied her in her dreams! How familiar she was with every line of the lips, the curve of the nostrils, the outline of the certain lock of hair that fell upon the forehead! And yet she had seen the face in reality less than half a dozen times. Why had it entered so persistently into her dreams? All her dreams had vanished—the dates of her marriage. Across the azure of her youth and come and gone a vague, beautiful flash of love. The door of earthly paradise had opened and closed. That delicate spirit, which blossoms when the joy of living seemed buried, her heart was broken and her young breast a tomb. With straining eyes she continued to gaze. The invisible arms of her love clasped Maurice to her heart and held him there. Only that day he had stood before her, a delight to the eye, and she had given him her hand to kiss. How bravely he had gone forth from the city! She had followed him with her ardent gaze until he was no longer to be seen. And now—dying—dying—

"Monsieur," she said, turning to the physician, "I have something to say to Monseigneur."

The physician bowed and passed into the boudoir, the door of which he closed.

"Father," she said to the prelate, "I have no secrets from you." She pointed to Maurice. "I love him. I know not why. He comes from a foreign land; his language nor his people are mine, and yet the thoughts of him has filled my soul. I have talked to him but four different times; and yet I love him. Why? I cannot tell. The mind has no power to rule the impulse of love. Were he to live, perhaps my love would be a sin. Is it not strange, father, that I love him? I have lost parental love; I am losing a love a woman holds priceless above all others. He is dying because of me. He loves me. I read it in his eyes just before he fell. Perhaps it is better for him and for me that he should die, for if he lived I could not live without him. Father, do I sin?"

"No, my child," and the prelate closed his eyes.

"I have been so lonely," she said, "so alone. I craved the love of the young. He was so different from any man I had met before. His bright, handsome face seemed constantly with me."

At this moment Maurice's breast rose and fell in a long sigh. Presently the lids of his eyes rolled upward. Consciousness had returned. His wandering gaze first encountered the sad, austere visage of the prelate.

"Monseigneur?" he said faintly.

"Do you wish absolution, my son?"

"I am dying?"

"Yes."

"I am dying . . . God has my account and he will judge it." He turned his head. "Your Highness?" He roved about the room with his eyes and discerned the feminine touch in all the appointments. "Where am I?"

"You are in my room, Monsieur," she said. Her voice broke, but she met his eyes with a brave smile. "Is there anything we can do for you?"

"Nothing. I am alone. To die . . . Well, one time or another. And yet, it is a beautiful world, when we but learn it, full of color and life and love. I am young; I do not wish to die. And now . . . even in the midst of life . . . where? Monseigneur, I am dying; to me princes and kings signify nothing. That is not to say that they ever did. In the presence of death we are all equal. Living, I might not speak dying . . . since I have but a little while to stay . . . I may speak."

"Yes, my son, speak. Her Highness will listen."

"It is to Her Highness that I wish to speak."

Her lips quivered and she made no sign.

THE TRIUMPH OF LOVE.

"YOU HAVE NOT LOVED IN VAIN."

Was it too late? Was it too late? Was it too late?