

THE TRAITORS

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The traitors by E. Phillips Oppenheim

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BY

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CHAPTER I

"DOWN with the traitors! Down with the Russian spies! Down with Metzger!"

Above the roaring of the north wind rose the clamour of voices, the cries of hate and disgust, the deep groaning sobs of fierce and militant anger. The man and the woman exchanged quick glances.

"They are coming nearer," he said.

She drew aside the heavy curtain, and stood there, looking out into the night.

"It is so," she answered. "They are pouring into the square."

He rose and stood beneath the great carved mantel-piece. Over his head, hewn out of the solid oak, black with age and coloured with that deep richness which is to-day as a lost art, were blazoned the arms of one of Europe's noblest families. He, Nicholas of Reist, its sole male representative, stood deep in thought, his dark young face furrowed with anxiety. The moment was critical. It was one of a lifetime.

She dropped the curtain and came over to his side. The flush of excitement was in her cheeks. Her eyes were like shining stars. Of their close relationship there could be no manner of doubt. The same oval face and finely cut features, the same pride of race, the same firm, graceful bearing. Only there were lines upon his face—the lines of thought and care; whilst hers remained as smooth as damask, typically and wonderfully beautiful.

Again the murmur of hoarse voices—nearer now and more clamorous.

"Down with the traitor Metzger and his accursed government. Reist! Reist! A Reist!"

Her white fingers fell upon his shoulder.

"They are calling for you, Nicholas," she said, softly. Listen! It is the voice of our people, and they need you. Will you go out and speak to them? Shall I open the window—yes?"

"Not yet," he answered, swiftly. "Not yet."

Her hands were already upon the curtains. She turned around, an impatient frown upon her face.

"You do not hesitate, my brother," she cried. "No, it is not possible. It is our country, Nicholas, our homeland which calls for you to save it."

"Ay, to save it—but how? Metzger has made the way difficult."

Her eyes flashed fire upon him. She was superbly disdainful.

"Are you the first Duke of Reist who has governed Theos?" she cried. "Is there not the blood of former Kings in your veins? Holy Mother, but it is intolerable that you should hesitate! Nicholas, if you let these people call in vain you will be the first of our race who has ever shrunk from his duty. I will not call you any longer my brother. Listen!"

"Reist! Nicholas of Reist! Down with the common dogs. Down with the traitors. Down with Metzger!"

He smiled faintly. Those subtle lines about his mouth were not there in vain.

"I wonder where Metzger is hiding," he murmured. "How good it would be to see him now. How he would quiver and shake. There is death in those voices."

She flashed a look of impatient scorn upon him.

"You are trifling with your destiny, Nicholas," she cried. "What matters the life or death of such as Metzger? Our people need you. Out and tell the men of Theos that once again a Reist will save his country."

He smiled faintly.

"Brave words, little sister. Brave words."

Her eyes were ablaze with anger.

"Have I been mistaken in you all these years, Nicholas?" she cried. "Listen again. Those are the children of your city who call to you for aid. Have you no longer the heart of a man or the blood of a patriot?"

A storm of wind and rain shook the high windows. From below came the sound of a multitude thronging nearer and nearer till the square seemed filled to overflowing with a surging mob. The man raised his head as one who listens, and the smile no longer lightened his face. The woman who watched him anxiously drew a long sigh of relief. She knew then beyond a doubt that it needed no words from her to fire his resolution.

"Marie," he said, quietly, "those are the voices which I have prayed all my life that I might hear. Only I fear that they do not know what they ask. Have you considered what it is that they would have from me?"

"They would make you lord of the country," she cried. "Who better or more fitted? Have no fear, Nicholas. You come of a race of rulers. The God of our fathers will guide your destiny."

The room, huge, unlit and darkened with tapestry hangings, seemed full of mysterious shadows. Only those two faces—the girl's passionate, the man's keenly thoughtful—seemed like luminous things. From below came still the murmur of voices rising every now and then to a hoarse roar. The man became suddenly explicit. His face relaxed. He came back from a far-away land of thought.

"Listen," he said. "These people have come to put me in Metzger's place. There would be no difficulty about that. Already I have received a message from the House of Laws. Bah! I have no stomach to sit in council with tradesmen and citizens to have my will questioned, to rule only by a casting vote. These modern forms of government are vile. They would make me President of their Republic—I, a Reist of Theos, whose forefathers ruled the land with sword and fire. They would put me in the place of Metzger, the

merchant—Metzger, who would have sold his country to the Russians. I say no!”

“What, then?” she cried. “What, then? Speak, Nicholas. There are thoughts behind. Who but I should know them?”

“If ever it should fall to my lot to be the keeper of our people,” he answered, slowly, “I promise you this, Marie. I shall rule even as the Kings of Theos have ruled before me, with a sceptre in their hands and a sword upon their knees.”

“Why not now?” she cried. “What time is like this? The people would accept you on any terms. The Republic has fallen. You shall be their King!”

He shook his head.

“Little sister,” he said, “would you make of me too—a traitor? Whilst a single member of the royal House of Tyrnaus lives he is my King, and I am his faithful servant.”

“They are a doomed race, Nicholas.”

“That is in God’s hands. If indeed they should pass away, then who can read the future? You must learn, Marie, as I have learned it, the legend on our walls and shield, the motto of our race, ‘Slowly but ever forward.’”

“But the people,” she cried. “What will you say to them? It is you whom they want. Their throats are hoarse with shouting.”

He threw open the great windows, and a roar of welcome from below rose high above the storm.

“You shall hear what I will say to them, Marie,” he answered. “Come out by my side.”

CHAPTER II

ALMOST as the man stepped out on to the massive stone balcony of his house the wind dropped and a red flaring sun dipped behind the towering mountains which guarded the city westwards and eastwards. A

roar of greeting welcomed his appearance, and while he waited for silence his eyes rested fondly upon the long line of iron-bound hills, stern and silent guardians of the city of his birth. The love of his country was born in the man—the better part of him was steeped in patriotic fervour. And most of all he loved this ancient city amongst the hills, the capital of the State, where many generations of his family had lived and died. Dear to him were its squares and narrow streets, the ancient stone houses, the many picturesque records of its great age ever, as it seemed to him, frowning with a stern and magnificent serenity amongst the tawdry evidences of later days and the irresistible march of modernity. The wine-shops of a hundred years ago flourished still side by side with the more pretentious *cafés*, half French, half Russian, which had sprung up like mushrooms about the city. The country-made homespuns, the glassware and metal-works, heritage of generations of craftsmen, survived still the hideous competition of cheap Lancashire productions and Brummagem ware. The picturesque old fought a brave battle with the tinsel and tawdriness of the new. If Nicholas of Reist could have had his way he would have built an impenetrable wall against this slow poison, the unwelcome heritage of Western progress. He would have thrust the ages back a century and built bulwarks about his beloved country. He looked downwards, and his heart grew warm within him. Many of the people who shouted his name were from the country districts and wore the picturesque garb of their forefathers long extinct in the city. The sight of their eager, upturned faces was dear to him. It might be that some day they should be his people indeed—that it should be his country to rule as he thought best. He felt himself at that moment a patriot pure and simple.

So he spoke to them in that clear, sweet voice which every Reist possessed, and he spoke fluently and convincingly.

"My fellow-countrymen," he said, "these are not days for those who love their country to waste breath in idle

speech. Your Republic of which you were so proud has fallen. Metzger has proved himself a traitor. Well, I am not surprised at either of these things. I warned you, but you would not listen. Your ancient Kings must indeed have turned in their graves when you elected to be ruled by such men. You have tried them, and you have been betrayed. What would you have with me ? ”

“ A new government,” they cried. “ A Reist for President ! ”

He raised his hand. The roar of voices died away at once.

“ You would put me,” he said, “ in Metzger’s place. You would make me President of the Republic of Theos. Is that what you would have ? ”

“ Ay ! Ay ! ” from a thousand tongues. Then there was a breathless silence. They waited in deep anxiety for the answer of this man whom they had come to look upon as their one possible saviour. At last he spoke to them.

“ My people,” he said, quietly, “ I thank you, and I am sorry that what you ask may not be. It is not because I do not love my country, it is not because I would not shed my last drop of blood in her defence. But President of your Republic I never will be. No earthly power should draw my footsteps across the threshold of your brand-new Parliament.”

There arose a deep murmur of disappointment—almost of despair. They shouted questions, appeals, prayers, and Nicholas of Reist leaned far over his time-worn stone balcony and spoke to them again.

“ You are questioning my patriotism,” he cried. “ You do not understand. Very well, you shall know all that is in my mind. I am going to say what will sound like treason to you. Perhaps you will shout me down—it may be that you will leave me now in disgust. Nevertheless, listen. I hate your Republic. It is a rotten, corrupt thing. I hate what you have called your Parliament. There is scarcely a man in it whom I would trust. What has your new-fangled scheme of