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THE STRANGER AND THE PRINCESS

BY SEWARD W. HOPKINS

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His heart was heavy, for he realized now that Monroe had been killed. This brought vividly to his mind the danger in which he stood, and his nerves became stronger as he drew himself together and resolved to combat this brotherhood of crime with all the skill and energy he possessed.

He heard the voices again. "What time did his highness say he would be here?" asked one. "Oh, you cannot limit his highness to a moment. Casparin is the most uncertain of men. But he will be here soon, no doubt."

So there was another highness in the game. Buckford was using his ears and brains now as he had never used them before.

This Casparin, whom they called his highness, could not be the Prince of Denesia, against whom they had plotted.

Monroe had told him who the Prince of Denesia was. He had described the beauty of the Princess Marie Alexia. Buckford was more than ever resolved to defeat the plot against them.

"It is unfortunate that Vandal was shot," said one of the voices. "That American did some damage before we got him."

"Yes, but it was lucky he did not kill Vandal. The other did not matter so much."

"Good!" said Buckford to himself. "I am glad I killed one. I wish I had killed Vandal. I may have another crack at him yet."

Another step was heard outside and then another.

Buckford now turned his head to get a peep through the accommodating keyhole.

He saw but a small portion of the outer room. It was well furnished, had a table and chairs in the center, and in the chairs sat two men. One of these was the man he had shot, Vandal, and the other was one of the two who had been previously talking.

In another portion of the room, hidden from Buckford's sight, were two more, one who had been there before and one a newcomer.

"Well," said a voice, "our game has been spoiled in Paris. That dashed American by his meddling has caused the police. We cannot do a thing now until the prince leaves Paris." The voice sounded familiar to Buckford. The person speaking was the pretended agent of police.

"Then your highness has not given up the idea?" said the voice of Vandal. "Given it up?"

A harsh voice followed the words. "Did you ever know Casparin Rockmillive to give up an idea until he had made it a success?"

Buckford thrilled again. So this speaker was Casparin Rockmillive. The incognito of the Prince of Denesia was the Count of Rockmillive. They were, then, relatives of each other. The plot against the Prince of Denesia was beginning to take shape and substance. Buckford had heretofore been working against a vapor of suspicion. Now he was gaining a substantial knowledge of what the plot involved.

"My illustrious brother and sister have already determined to leave Paris and return to Denesia," said the voice of Casparin. "They will undoubtedly take up their residence in the palace at Trolle, the capital, until the birth of the heir."

"And it is this event that your highness must prevent?"

For a moment there was silence. "I am not prepared to say," came the slow, steady voice of Casparin Rockmillive, "that I wish particularly to destroy my sister-in-law, the Princess Margaret. Had I been the heir to the throne of Denesia instead of my brother I would have been the husband of Margaret Granville, but the mighty ambition of the American heiress rose even to the throne itself, and she took my more fortunate brother. Yet, even to accomplish my designs and win the throne of Denesia for myself, I will sacrifice her. But I prefer, as I had already made clear when the bungling Reber brought that American in to spoil our plan, I say I prefer to kill that is, get rid of the prince while I am yet his presumptive. There is yet time to accomplish this. I had supposed to find it easier in Paris, where these things are done without difficulty as a rule, than in Trolle, where the energetic Duvally has his myrmidons at all times on the alert."

"I know now, however, that the work cannot be done in Paris. We must wait till we reach Trolle. Then Duvally himself must go. And with him out of the way, we can easily reach the prince."

Buckford became more and more absorbed. He now felt a national interest in the affair. He was fighting now not only for the life of a prince and princess, but for the inheritance of the child of an American girl.

He remembered now when Margaret Granville, one of the most beautiful and richest of American girls, married Prince Charles of Denesia. He was not then the ruling prince. The match was a love match, the wedding a quiet one, and Buckford had thought little of it at the time. And now he was listening to the brutal details of a dreadful plot against his fair countrywoman.

His fists clenched, his teeth were set firmly together, and he lost even his last lingering regret that he had become involved in a case that so seriously threatened his life.

"I will get out of this alive," he said, "and I will meet this wonderful Duvally, and between us we'll see what can be done."

"I suppose, then, your highness," said one of the men, "that we are now released from all connection with the case. If so, what about our reward for what we have endeavored to do?"

There was a low sarcastic laugh from Prince-Casparin.

"It is not the rule usually," he said, "to reward failures in matters of this kind. Nor is it advisable to have several sets of confidants in various parts of the world. I have laid before you all my plans and have named the several rewards you may expect if I am enabled by your assistance to make myself the ruling prince of Denesia. I think, gentlemen, it will be much better for all concerned for you to go with me to Denesia and there carry out the plans that have been interrupted here."

"Trolle is not Paris," said one. "We would not have the assistance of the brotherhood, who do our bidding without even wishing to know the object."

"But I have willing servants in Denesia," said Casparin. "They are not, I think, as shrewd as my Parisian friends, but they will do in emergencies. I wish, however, to confine the secret to us four. It is enough. Four men who know the truth will be enough for me to carry when I come to the throne."

"Then if we attempt that which is far more dangerous and difficult than what we agreed to do," said Vandal, "it is right that our rewards should be increased accordingly. For myself, I have seen the Princess Marie Alexia. If you become ruling prince of Denesia, I should desire to become your brother-in-law. One does not assassinate his brother-in-law so quickly as an outsider."

"But in the case before us it is the brother," said Casparin, with a cruel laugh. "What you ask is impossible. I know that Marie is the fairest girl in all Europe. But her hand must go to Russia. In the plans I have mapped out for the future greatness of Denesia I have absolute need of Russian assistance and backing. Why can you not be content with the wealth and position I have offered? And, as for a lovely bride, there is one who is second only to Marie. That is Adria Volner, the fiancée of Bossu Duvally. She is a beauty after the same style as Marie and will suit you as well."

"I suppose I must be content," said Vandal. "Then I am to receive a million francs, a high position among your advisers and this beautiful Adria Volner for a bride?"

"Yes, and then, our two able friends and aids, shall each receive a half million francs and their pick of Denesian beauties if they wish to marry and settle in my country."

"That is a fair offer," said one. "What do you say, Reber?"

Buckford started. One voice had all along seemed strangely familiar, but the seeming circumstances made it impossible to recall where he had heard it. It flashed upon him.

Reber was the man who had met him on the bridge and introduced him into this circle of fascinating cutthroats.

"I think it is fair," said Reber. "But that face of yours, friend Robello, would not be pleasing to the young Denesian beauty."

"Let my face alone!" growled the man called Robello, and Buckford made a mental note.

"Now," he said, "I know the four plotters by name and three of them by sight. Vandal and Reber I have met. That is Robello sitting with Vandal, but his back is toward me. However, he must be ugly, or Reber's remark is pointless. And the fourth is Casparin."

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brother of the Prince of Denesia. And what a quartet of precious scoundrels! They at the bidding of this rascal Casparin will assassinate the prince before his heir is born in order to put Casparin on the throne of the little country. And not only the prince, but an American woman and a beautiful princess are in danger. Come, Buckford, you have work to do. And the first thing to do is to escape from this place. How the devil is that to be done, I wonder?"

His soliloquy was interrupted by another step and a heavy German voice.

"Well, Monshure Mein Herr," said the voice, "I did that job well. Is it not so?"

"Yes, but you must not come here. You must keep away from us," replied Casparin.

"Hol! That is not so easy. Then where am I to get the money on which to live? I must no longer be seen in the stables of the prince! I am not to see you! What then, the river?"

"Go to the devil!" growled Casparin. "It is most fortunate that there are French gentlemen to help me. I would not want a band of German aids. But come. You did my bidding that time and duped the two Americans almost as well as I duped one. I will pay you as I agreed, but stipulate that you depart. Leave Paris, and do not go to Denesia."

"Oh, then, that is not bad," said the German, rattling a well filled purse. "There is Germany."

"Yes. Go there, for God's sake!" said Casparin, and the others laughed.

Between Buckford Wallace and the four members of this band there were many scores to be settled. But just then Buckford was at a most serious disadvantage.

"I must now leave you," said Vandal. "I have business with Mme. du Barry below."

"Then you need not hurry, for Mme. du Barry is in the room beneath this lying down with a severe headache," said Casparin. "Instead come with me, and I can promise you an afternoon of real amusement."

"I accept," said Vandal. "The Prince Casparin is admittedly a connoisseur in pleasure—and beauty."

"But what about that meddler," asked Robello, "that supposed suicide that Reber insisted on employing to do some work which we should trust to no one? What about him?"

"I did what I thought was best," said Reber doggedly. "I saw the fellow about to jump into the Seine. Men



"Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!" she exclaimed. "Who are you?"

who are ready to do that can always be used in our way. But this fellow was different from any I have seen before. Anyway, he's dead."

"Is he in that room?" asked Vandal. "Yes. We just looked at him. He is dead enough."

"Well, leave him till tonight. One last night, one this. He will be found in the brewery yard tomorrow, and the police will have another mystery to unravel."

With a laugh they left the room. Buckford's brain had not been idle. Even while he listened he was studying how to turn what he heard to his advantage.

He could not get out of the room by way of the door. Even if he knocked down the partition he would arouse the house, and the outer door would no doubt be found locked.

"Well, if this Mme. du Barry is below with a headache I'll have to make it ache a little more," he said. He went to work on a sudden plan at once.

With his quick eye he glanced from his window and measured the distance to the next. It was a building of low ceilings. The drop was not great.

A leader ran down from the roof within reach. He tested it and judged that it would hold his weight.

Creeping his neck, he saw that the window of the room below was open. Mme. du Barry wanted air.

He leaned out, grasped the leader firmly, swung from his window and slid neatly and quietly into the room below.

A woman of heavy build and exceedingly masculine appearance lay on a bed asleep. The key of the room was in the door. Buckford stepped to it to make sure it was turned.

Then he shook the woman and woke her.

"Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!" she exclaimed, starting up. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"Keep quiet, madame," he said coolly. "I am an agent of police. I have come to your house to look for a missing prisoner."

Mme. du Barry turned pale and shivered.

To be Continued.

IN OUT OF THE RAIN.
The Father—I am so glad John got elected to Congress.
The mother—Yes. It's a great relief. He has tried so many ways of earning a living and failed.

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