

THE STRANGER AND THE PRINCESS

BY SEWARD W. HOPKINS

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"Don't you know me?" asked Monroe, as he tore the beard from his face.

"Lighted. I congratulate you. It was well done. Enter, and I will call for refreshments at once."

"It seems good to be at liberty once more," said Buckford. "Where is this place?"

"In the Rue de Creuse," replied Monroe. "I don't know the neighborhood." Neither did Buckford. Had he known that the Rue de Creuse was the next street to the Rue de Mont-Rouge he might have had a queer sensation.

They were led into a small room, where two or three tables stood against the walls.

"This cafe is not known as such to many," said the obliging police agent, who sat down with them. "It is kept by a friend of mine, an estimable lady, who had the misfortune to be left a widow with two children to support."

Mme. du Barry will be here presently and make you feel at home and welcome."

Instead of Mme. du Barry, however, a water pitcher with glasses, a bottle of wine and a card on which to write the orders of the guests.

They each ordered a substantial supper, for they were hungry, and laughed as they spoke of the difference between the meal Buckford was going to eat and the one he would have had in the depot.

Suddenly, when they had grown used to the place and the sense of security had become strong, a panel opened in the door directly behind Buckford, and a heavy club, under an electric light, struck him on the head.

He fell unconscious to the floor. Monroe, who had seen the panel alight, had leaped to his feet and drawn a pistol from his pocket. But the obliging police agent leaped like a panther upon him, seized his arms, and while his cries for help rang impatiently against the walls two other scoundrels rushed in, and the deadly club that kill and leave no mark raised upon his head.

In the darkness of the night poor Bob Monroe, too chivalrous and confiding, was dragged by the heels to the refuse heap of a nearby brewery facing on the Rue de Mont-Rouge.

Which explains the cry of the policeman who rushed into the office of the investigating magistrate, M. Senecal, and struck everybody dumb with his startling information.

CHAPTER VII. THE CONSPIRATORS OVERHEARD.

It was more chance than merit that saved Buckford's life when Monroe, less fortunate than he, was battered to death by the clubs of his hidden assassins.

He had not seen the attack, and the first blow sent him unconscious to the floor. Monroe had seen the blow struck and, rising to fight, had brought the concentrated fury of the murderers upon himself.

Having killed one innocent, the thirst for blood of the scoundrels must have been assuaged, or they were acting under orders that left them but one course to pursue.

Or, perhaps they did not examine Buckford closely enough to discover that he had not been killed.

One corpse on the refuse heap was enough.

At any rate, Buckford, instead of being dragged from the building as Monroe had been, was taken to a small room and left lying on the floor in his awful stupor.

He did not know, and it is not our business to say, just how long he lay there. He awoke at first with a dull throbbing pain in his head. He was conscious of a terrible thirst. Half-sufficed, yet knowing he was where he ought not to be, he sat up and looked around him.

Gradually, as his blood circulated more freely, the pain in his head decreased, and his senses became more acute.

He found that he was in a very small room that had evidently been formed after the house was built, by running a partition of thin and narrow wooden strips across the end of a larger room.

The purpose of this little room—the original purpose—was not apparent. It may have been to provide an extra bed or dressing room. Its present purpose was clear—it was his prison.

The room was about six feet in width and about ten in length. The wooden partition ran along one of the long sides, and in this there was a small door.

At one of the narrow ends there was a window.

Wallace sat for some time on the floor before he gathered strength enough to rise. The blow on his head had deprived him not only of consciousness, but of strength as well. There was absolutely no furniture in the room. It was, however, carpeted with a thick, firm fabric.

After a time he rose to his feet, shook off the momentary dizziness, and began a more extended examination of his prison.

He was really fit enough to be in bed, but excitement and the sense of impending danger kept him up.

He did not know that Monroe was dead. He had last seen Monroe sitting quietly at a table drinking wine and waiting for his supper.

He first tried the door in the wooden partition. It was locked. He then went to the window. It opened upon a small narrow court.

The building opposite was almost a yard of windows. There were two

ventilators, but nothing to be called a window as windows go.

But leaning from his window and looking down he saw that there was a similar one underneath it in the same house. It opened, no doubt, from a room similar to the one he was in, or similar to the one that existed before the wooden partition was put in.

The window was there, but it conveyed no thought of escape to his mind. He had not as yet begun to form any plan of escape. The ground was far below him—the paved court, from which no exit was seen, except through the lower stories of the abutting buildings.

He turned from the window and leaned against the wall in deep and troubled study.

Where was Monroe? That was the first question he asked himself. It was clear that the plan to rescue him from the police station was simply to bring him again into the hands of the enemies of the prince. The plot had succeeded, as far as he was concerned, but where was Monroe?

No suspicion of the American entered the head of Wallace. He believed that Monroe had been duped by the pretended police agent. He hoped that Monroe had more fortune than he and had made his escape.

For a moment he was silent. Then he said to himself: "The poor devil that happened to be for Monroe to confess his share in the plot to the police and have them come to recapture him."

Terrible as was the uncertainty of his fate in the hands of the police, his situation as a captive of the plotters was worse.

But would Monroe confess? Would he betray himself to the police and destroy his position in Parisian society?

While Buckford thought out all these perplexing questions he became suddenly conscious that voices could be heard through the wooden partition.

He bent himself to bring his ear to the keyhole of the door.

"Undoubtedly both Americans are dead," said one voice. "The poor devil who did our work so well has been discovered in the brewery court and taken to his home. Well, the police will have a fine hunt for the murderers. But this will simply be another great mystery for Paris to ponder over. These police! They are but cheap fools at best."

"Let's take a look at this one," said another voice. "I have somehow come to consider this fellow a dangerous enemy. He seems at least to care little for life. It is the man who is willing to die who lives through everything."

"Bah! He has fallen into difficulties at every step. Why, even Vandal's little act was attributed to him."

"Yes, but he was caught in the very house with the corpse of M. de Bullion."

"It was a most fortunate circumstance that Vandal gave him the purse."

Buckford's breath came fast now. These words meant much to him. They proved that the man who had given him the purse, the man who had had most to do apparently with the plot against the prince, was the man who killed M. de Bullion.

"Well," said the other, "Vandal is a Parisian and knows a thing or two." The footsteps of the two speakers were now heard in the little door.

Buckford, remembering the remark, "Let's take a look at this one," lay down on the floor and assumed a position nearly like that in which he had before been lying.

A key sounded in the lock, and the door opened.

"He has not moved."

No one came near him. One glance sufficed to prove to the two men that he had been lying in that position since he had been brought to the room.

The door was again shut and the lock clicked.

Buckford slowly opened his eyes to make sure no one had remained in his room. He saw no one and sprang to his feet and applied his ear to the keyhole again.

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. "Well," said a voice, "our game has been spoiled in Paris. That dashed American by his meddling has aroused the police. We cannot do a thing now until the prince leaves Paris." The voice would have been the pretended agent of police.

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

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

Buckford thrilled again. So this speaker was Casparin Rockmilliv. The incognito of the Prince of Deneslia was the Count of Rockmilliv. They were, then, relatives of each other. The plot against the Prince of Deneslia was beginning to take shape and substance. Buckford had heretofore been working against a vague 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 Deneslia," 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 he was silent. Then he said to himself: "The poor devil that happened to be for Monroe to confess his share in the plot to the police and have them come to recapture him."

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