

THE STRANGER AND THE PRINCESS

BY SEWARD W. HOPKINS

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"What is it, mon-madame?" asked Mme. du Barry, suppressing a strong desire to shriek.

"Madame," said Buckford, with some little show of annoyance in his tones, "I have just discovered that I came away this morning with no money. Now, it is well known that you have a bank account. Be kind enough, therefore, to come with me to the bank and draw a certain amount I shall name."

"Oh, the police have added robbery to their other virtues, I repeat."

"No; this is a loan. I borrow the money, madame, and repay with interest. To refuse me, madame, will mean to walk into the Palais de Justice instead of the bank."

Madame shuddered at the mention of that place, which she fancied she had so cheaply escaped.

She groaned at the thought of losing money, but the alternative was worse. And the idea of police extortion was by no means new to her.

On the way to the bank Buckford was busy with his conscience, which had for the first time taken to the air.

"How far am I justified in going with this creature?" he was asking himself. "It is surely dishonest not to take her money, yet if I do, I can repay her, with good interest. My own life and the lives of three innocent persons and the apprehension of four rescues all depend on my having money. I must have it, and I will. If I am doing wrong, let the law take care of me. And this woman is planning to betray me and is my enemy."

He smiled and continued:

"I will fight my enemies with their own weapons. I suppose both Casparin and Vandal have added to madame's wealth."

They reached the bank.

"How much, monsieur? Will a hundred francs be sufficient?"

"No; I must have a thousand."

"A thousand francs, monsieur?"

"Hush! There is a gendarme at the corner. If you do not obey me, I will have him arrest you as the accomplice of the murderers and robbers and spies against the government."

Mme. du Barry shivered and drew the money.

With the shew of war in his possession Buckford felt stronger. He now called a cab and, remembering what Monroe had told him about the Prince of Deneslia, was driven to the hotel the prince had occupied in Paris. He found the concierge in charge of an empty place.

"Madame," said the concierge in reply to Buckford's question, "M. le Comte Lockwood is left here yesterday. I believe he is now on his way to Austria or Germany. Can I send madame in any way?"

In an hour Buckford, with the still smiling but now bewildered Mme. du Barry, was at the terminal station of the Strassburg railway, where Buckford, but half knowing whether he was right or wrong, purchased two tickets for Strassburg.

"Now, madame," he said as the train started, "we are off upon our adventures."

Mme. du Barry glanced at the gay gown her companion wore, which had been presented to her by Vandal and which could be easily recognized by him, and smiled again.

"I am glad, M. le Comte," said Mme. du Barry, "to be permitted to enjoy the whole affair and consider her thousand francs very well spent indeed."

CHAPTER IX.
THE INN AT ONTRO.

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"Yes," said Casparin. "That is why I came home with you. I must see that disposed of. We must have no had breaks now. My brother is gone, and we must start within a few days."

"The sooner the better," said Vandal. "I shall not be sorry to earn that reward."

"Nor I!" "Nor I!" added Reber and Robello.

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"I agree!" "I agree!" said Reber and Robello.

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"I will be a place of a funeral soon," chuckled Reber. "That chap I found on the bridge! Ho, ho! He didn't know what was good for him. But, after all, what is the difference between the cellar of madame's house and the Seine?"

"Yes, what?" added Robello.

"Shut up," said Vandal roughly. "I tell you I don't like this. It means something."

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"Hello, Francois! What is this? Where is madame?" asked Vandal.

"Francois looked up sleepily.

"I don't know, monsieur," he said. "I have not seen madame since she went this morning to lie down with her headache. She is out, so much I know, for the cook, who was coming from the markets, saw her leave the house."

"And did she leave no word with any one?"

"Not a word, monsieur."

"That is strange. Well, sit up for madame. We are going up stairs. In a short time you may hear us moving about."

"You may even bring our own wine from the cellar. There will be no need of attending us. Do you understand?"

"I understand, monsieur."

Francois did more than understand. He rejoiced, for he was sleepy.

The four passed on up stairs. They entered the room in which they had held the conference overheard by Buckford.

"Get a light, Heber, while I unlock this door," said Vandal.

"Poof!" muttered Reber, moving about slowly to obey. "It is time we got that thing out of there. Poof! And it is not so very hot either."

"Yes, it is high time," said Robello.

Reber having found a lamp and lighted it, Vandal took his key from his pocket and opened the door. He stepped in with the lamp. The others followed him.

Vandal stood with the lamp raised above his head. The other three stood grouped around him gazing stupidly at him as he unlocked the door. He was the first to recover his speech.

"There is something wrong here!" he said. "Some one has removed the body."

"Impossible!" blurted out Vandal. "None but Reber and myself have the keys."

"You are surely mistaken. The door was locked. Look! Has it been tampered with?"

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"Some one certainly has access to this room," said Casparin. "You told me you held the keys."

"And so—that is the truth. I myself had this partition placed here. I put on that lock with my own hands. There were two keys with the lock, and I gave one to Reber. As I live, these are the only keys that will unlock this door."

"Then account for this mystery. We left a dead man locked in here. He is gone, and yet you alone could open the door."

"And we thought he was getting—ho, the window is open!" said Reber.

"That is a still greater mystery!" said Vandal. "The window was locked on the inside. Some one has managed to come up and get it open and take out the American."

Casparin laughed—a long, low hissing laugh of anger and derision.

"I am beside myself with delight," he said. "I can come to Deneslia to find men who were quick and shrewd in planning. I thought the French could excel in that. Why, we have played men in Deneslia who are better."

"What do you think, then?" asked Vandal.

"Why do I think? My God! Are you still in the dark? What do I think! I know. The man you left in here was not dead. He recovered consciousness, climbed out of that window and made his escape. We now have him against us and at liberty. We might better have left him in the Palais de Justice. There was no certainty he would be believed."

"He must have escaped. Yes, he must surely have gone out of the window," said Reber and Robello.

"And of course, since you are so wise, you gentlemen," said Casparin, "you can associate his escape and the disappearance of your Mme. du Barry with each other."

"No, no! Surely not!" said Vandal. "Surely yes! Was her room not under this?"

"Her room is there."

"Her room no longer, my friend. I fear you will find the body dead in the room. It was not Mme. du Barry the cook saw leaving, but the American dressed in madame's clothes."

At this a horrified cry came from Vandal, and he rushed for the door. He led the way and the others followed him to the floor below. The door of madame's room was not locked. Vandal entered, expecting to see a most ghastly sight.

He saw nothing but a bed, slightly rumpled, and articles of female clothing lying about.

"I own my mistake," said Casparin, with a laugh. "The American has not killed madame. He has eloped with her."

Vandal cursed Reber and Robello.

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them both," cried Vandal.

"Take my advice and go to bed," said Casparin. "We can do nothing before daylight. There is nothing to fear at once, for the American will not give himself up to the police before he ascertains what fate they have in store for him. A reward of 5,000 francs is offered for his apprehension."

Reber slipped his leg.

"Good! It was worth 5,000 francs to us for him to escape. We will run him down and earn the reward!"

"My friend, you are quick to think, but you invariably think the wrong thing. We shall do nothing of the kind. We will run him down, but the police shall never see him."

"Oh, as to that, you are able to pay the 5,000 francs?"

"And will. Now get some rest. We must be early start."

They obeyed him, and early in the morning they were ready and eager for the chase.

It proved to be far from difficult to track Mme. du Barry. She was well known in that quarter.

It was soon learned by persistent questioning on the part of Vandal that Mme. du Barry, in company with another woman, beautiful and well-dressed, had been seen on the street. No one knew the other woman.

But by bit they traced madame, and finally the clue led to the bank.

"It is surely an elopement," said Vandal. "She has drawn her money."

"Then they are on the way to America," said Reber.

The trail ended at the bank. It was in a quarter where no one knew Mme. du Barry. They returned to the house and were disappointed. It was indeed the American being found before he had time to warn the Prince of Deneslia of the plot against him.

At the house they found a telegram from Mme. du Barry at Strassburg. It was addressed to Vandal.

"I am in Strassburg without money. Have been the victim of a police agent."

"What mystery is this?" demanded Casparin. "Have the police regained possession of the American? He may be shot after all. Come, things may not be so bad. We must go to Strassburg."

"To Strassburg? Why not send money to madame to return?"

"Such would be the thing if we were certain the man was dead. But we are in doubt. If he is alive, as indeed seems probable, he is either in the hands of the police or in Strassburg, with madame. In the first instance, we must take ourselves out of Paris at once, and, in the second, we must get to Strassburg as soon as possible. You see we kill two birds with one stone. We must go to Strassburg."

The four were soon in a train bound for Strassburg. Vandal had the telegram from madame. It bore the name of no hotel. It had been sent from the railway station.

Having reached Strassburg they went to the hotel where the station began their search.

They found madame asleep on one of the benches with two infuriated employees angrily ordering her to sit up or they would call the police.

"I have seen her eyes," said Vandal and leaped to her feet with a cry like that of a tigress.

"Oh! Ah! You have come, then?" she said. "Have you brought knives and pistols to kill a beast? Well, that you must do. I have sat here since last evening, and I am weary with loss of sleep and my awful hunger. For the love of the good God, get me something to eat."

Vandal obediently took her to the cafe, and she attacked her meal with the same voracity as the prisoner.

"And now," said Casparin, "while you are eating, madame, please tell us what happened to you, and why an agent of police brought you here."

"Bah! Those police! I was asleep in my room. I woke to find a young man there. He ordered me to be quiet. He said he was an agent of police in search of a prisoner. He declared he had searched my house and was assured the prisoner was gone. I knew he had found that little room up stairs where the prisoner was hidden. Well, he then had other fish to fry. He was after some spies against the government. You were one, Vandal; you, my goodness, were another. He commanded me to obey and threatened to take me to the Palais de Justice. I am all know whether that would be agreeable. I obeyed. He made me dress him as a woman. Oh, I laughed when I disguised him! I gave him that fine silk gown you gave me, Vandal. He was with the police. Well, you will know that madame when you meet her. She has on that gown. Then we went to the bank. I drew a thousand francs, and he took it all. We came to Strassburg, and here I am. Where the agent of police is I do not know. When we arrived here, he told me to remain here while he went to engage a carriage. That was the last I saw of him or my thousand francs."

Reber and Robello gazed wonderingly. Vandal looked at Casparin for the solution of this great mystery.

"My friend, you have been badly sold," said the prince. "The supposed agent of police was no other than our prisoner. He climbed from his room to yours. He assumed the role of police to frighten you into obedience. He had no money, of course, just coming from the Palais de Justice. You kindly accommodated him with a thousand francs."

"He brought you here and left you without money in order to prevent your telling us until he had had time to escape."

"This matter is more serious than it seems. It proves that this American, instead of being, as we supposed, a youth who was easy to dupe, is shrewd and farseeing. He will be an enemy worthy of our steel."

"But undoubtedly he is now on the way to America," said Reber.

"Senseless. One scarcely goes from Paris to America by way of Strassburg. He had but a thousand francs. It would not carry him there after his expense of bringing himself and madame here. He has gone to Deneslia. That my friends, is where we shall find him—in Deneslia. And we must find him soon or our game will be knocked into rubbish."

"But what, then, of me?" asked Mme. du Barry. "Am I to starve or be dragged to Deneslia with you?"

"I think you had better go home. I will furnish you the money," said Casparin.

Pleased at this, Mme. du Barry took the money and the next train to Paris.

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"But undoubtedly he is now on the way to America," said Reber.

"Senseless. One scarcely goes from Paris to America by way of Strassburg. He had but a thousand francs. It would not carry him there after his expense of bringing himself and madame here. He has gone to Deneslia. That my friends, is where we shall find him—in Deneslia. And we must find him soon or our game will be knocked into rubbish."

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"He brought you here and left you without money in order to prevent your telling us until he had had time to escape."

"This matter is more serious than it seems. It proves that this American, instead of being, as we supposed, a youth who was easy to dupe, is shrewd and farseeing. He will be an enemy worthy of our steel."

"But undoubtedly he is now on the way to America," said Reber.

"Senseless. One scarcely goes from Paris to America by way of Strassburg. He had but a thousand francs. It would not carry him there after his expense of bringing himself and madame here. He has gone to Deneslia. That my friends, is where we shall find him—in Deneslia. And we must find him soon or our game will be knocked into rubbish."

"But what, then, of me?" asked Mme. du Barry. "Am I to starve or be dragged to Deneslia with you?"

"I think you had better go home. I will furnish you the money," said Casparin.

Pleased at this, Mme. du Barry took the money and the next train to Paris.

"I own my mistake," said Casparin, with a laugh. "The American has not killed madame. He has eloped with her."

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