



The Princess Elopes

By HAROLD McGRATH

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"The Man on the Box,"
"Hearts and Masks," Etc.

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SYNOPSIS.

The American consul to Barscheit, a principality of Europe, tells how the reigning grand duke had tried to find a husband for his rebellious niece, the Princess Hildegarde, finally decreeing that she wed the Prince of Doppelkinn, an ugly old widower, ruler of the neighboring principality. Though he had been the country for six months the American consul had never seen the princess. While horseback riding in the country night overtakes him and he seeks accommodation in a dilapidated old castle. In it he finds two women and an old servant, who feed him and his horse. One announces herself as the Princess Hildegarde, the other as the Hon. Betty Moore of England. The princess insists that he remain as a witness to a meeting to be held in the castle that night.

CHAPTER III.—Continued.

"Must! My presence here ought not to be known to any one. When you witness that which shall take place here to-night, you will understand." Her tone lost its evenness; it trembled and became a bit wild.

"In what manner may I be of service to your highness?" I asked pleasantly, laying aside my gloves and crop again. "I can easily give you my word of honor as a gentleman not to report your presence here; but if I am forced to remain, I certainly demand—"

"Desire," she corrected, the old fire in her eyes.

"Thank you. I desire, then, to know the full reason; for I can not be a party to anything which may reflect upon the consulate. For myself, I do not care." What hare-brained escapade was now in the air?

"You have heard that I am to marry the Prince of Doppelkinn?" she began. I nodded.

"Doubtless you have also heard of my determination not to marry him?" she went on.

"Well, I am not going to marry him."

"I was seized with the desire to laugh but dared not. What had all this to do with my detention in the castle?"

"Betty," said the princess, turning imploringly to her companion ("what a change!"), "you tell him."

"I?" The Honorable Betty drew back.

(Had they kidnapped old Doppelkinn? I wondered.)

"I can not tell him," cried her highness miserably, "I simply can not. You must do it, Betty. It is now absolutely necessary that he should know everything; it is absolutely vital that he be present. Perhaps heaven has sent him. Do you understand? Now, tell him!"

And, wonders to behold! she who but a few minutes gone had been a princess in everything, cold, secluding, tranquil, she fled from the room. (Decidedly this was growing interesting. What had they done?) Thus, the Honorable Betty Moore and his excellency, the American consul at Barscheit, were left staring into each other's eyes fully a minute.

"You will, of course, pledge me your word of honor?" She who had recently been timid now became cool and even-pulsed.

"If in pledging it I am asked to do nothing to discredit my office. I am not an independent individual,"—smiling to put her more at ease. (I haven't the least doubt that I would have committed any sort of folly had she required it of me.)

"You have my word, sir, that you will be asked to do nothing dishonorable. On the other hand, you will confer a great favor upon her highness, who is in deep trouble and is seeking a way to escape it."

"Command me," said I promptly.

"Her highness is being forced into marriage with a man who is old enough to be her grandfather. She holds him in horror, and will go to any length to make this marriage an impossibility. For my part, I have tried to convince her of the futility of resisting her royal uncle's will." (Sensible little Britisher!) "What she is about to do will be known only to four persons, one of whom is a downright rascal."

"A rascal?" slipped my lips, half-unconsciously. "I trust that I haven't given you that impression," I added eagerly. (A rascal? The plot was thickening to formidable proportions.)

"No, no!" she cried hastily, with a flash of summer on her lips. (What is more charming than an English woman with a clear sense of the humorous?) "You haven't given me that impression at all."

"Thank you." My vanity expanded under the genial warmth of this knowledge. It was quite possible that she looked upon me favorably.

"To proceed. There is to be a kind of mock marriage here to-night, and you are to witness it." She watched me keenly.

I frowned.

"Patience! Not literally a mock marriage but the filling out of a bogus certificate."

"I do not understand at all."

"You have heard of Hermann Steinbock, a cashiered officer?"

"Yes. I understand that he is the rascal to whom you refer."

"Well, this certificate is to be filled out completely. To outwit the duke, her highness commits—"

"A forgery."

"It is a terrible thing to do, but she has gone too far to withdraw now. She is to become the wife of Hermann Steinbock. She wishes to show the certificate to the duke."

"But the bans have not been made public."

"That does not matter."

"But why detain me?" I was growing restless. It was all folly, and no good would come of it.

"It is necessary that a gentleman should be present. The caretaker is not a gentleman. I have said that Steinbock is a rascal. As I reviewed the events, I begin to look upon your arrival as timely. Steinbock is not a reliable quantity."

"I begin to perceive."

"He is to receive 1,000 crowns for his part in the ceremony; then he is to leave the country."

"But the priest's signature, the notary's seal, the iron-clad formalities which attend all these things!" I stammered.

"You will recollect that her highness is a princess of the blood. Seldom is she refused anything in Barscheit." She went to a small secretary and produced a certificate, duly sealed and signed. There lacked nothing but Steinbock's name.

"But the rascal will boast about it! He may blackmail all of you. He may convince the public that he has really married her highness."

"I think not. We have not moved in this blindly. Steinbock we know to have forged the name of the minister of finance. We hold this sword above his head. And if he should speak or boast of it, your word would hold greater weight than his. Do you understand now?"

"Yes, I understand. But I believe that I am genuinely sorry to have

pass an opinion upon your highness' actions," I replied, with excusable irony.

"Excellent!" she exclaimed. "I have grown weary of scyophants. You are not afraid of me at all."

"Not in the slightest degree," I declared.

"You will not regret what you are about to do. I can make it very pleasant for you in Barscheit—or very unpleasant." But this threatening supplement was made harmless by the accompanying smile.

"May I offer the advice of rather a worldly man?"

"Well?"

"When Steinbock comes bid him go about his business."

The Honorable Betty nodded approvingly, but her highness shrugged.

"Since you are decided," and I bowed. "Now, what time does this fellow put in his appearance?"

Her highness beamed upon the Honorable Betty. "I like the way he says 'this fellow'; it reassures me. He is due at nine o'clock; that is to say, in half an hour. I will give you these directions. I do not wish Steinbock to know of your presence here. You will hide in the salon, close to the portieres, within call. Moreover, I shall have to impose upon you the disagreeable duty of playing the listener. Let nothing escape your ear or your eye. I am not certain of this fellow Steinbock, though I hold a sword above his head."

"But where are your men?" I asked. She smiled. "There is no one here but Leopold."

"Your highness to meet Steinbock alone?"

"I have no fear of him; he knows who I am."

"Everything shall be done as you wish." I secretly hoped I might have the opportunity to punch Steinbock's head.

"Thank you." The transition of her moods always left me in wonder. "Play something; it is impossible to talk." She perched herself on the broad arm of the Honorable Betty's chair, and her arm rested lightly but affectionately on her shoulder.

"Hark!"

We all listened intently. The sound

of beating hoofs came distinctly. A single horseman was galloping along the highway toward the castle. The sound grew nearer and nearer; presently it ceased. I rose quietly.

"It is time I hid myself, for doubtless this rider is the man."

The princess paled for a moment, while her companion nervously plucked at the edges of her handkerchief.

"Go," said the former, "and be watchful."

I then took up my position behind the portieres. Truly I had stumbled into an adventure; but how to stumble out again? If the duke got wind of it, it would mean my recall, and I was of a mind, just then, that I was going to be particularly fond of Barscheit.

All was silent. A door closed, and then came the tread of feet. I peered through the portieres shortly to see the entrance of two men, one of whom was the old caretaker. His companion was a dark, handsome fellow, of Hungarian gypsy type. There was a devil-may-care air about him that fitted him well. It was Steinbock. He was dressed with scrupulous care, in spite of the fact that he wore riding clothes. It is possible that he recognized the importance of the event. One did not write one's name under a princess' signature every day, even in mockery. There was a half-smile on his face that I did not like.

"Your highness sees that I am prompt,"—uncovering.

"It is well. Let us proceed at once to conclude the matter in hand," she said.

"Wholly at your service!"

(Hang the fellow's impudence! How dared he use that jovial tone?)

"I am not sufficiently well-born to

blundered into this castle to-night."

"Oh, if you lack courage!" carelessly.

I laughed. "I am not afraid of 20 Steinbocks."

Her laughter echoed mine. "Come, Mr. ——— By the way, I believe I do not know your name."

"Warrington—Arthur Warrington."

"That is a very good English name, and a gentleman possessing it will never leave two women in a predicament like this. You will understand that we dare not trust any one at court. Relative to her highness, the duke succeeds in bribing all."

"But a rascal like Steinbock!"

"I know,"—a bit wearily.

"It is pardonable to say that I believe her highness has been very foolish."

The girl made a gesture which conceded the fact. "It is too late to retreat, as I have told you. Steinbock is already on the way. We must trust him. But you?"

"After all, what does a consulate amount to?"

"Your highness!" she called.

The princess returned. She looked at me with a mixture of fierceness and defiance, humility and supplication. I had always supposed her to be a sort of hobbledohoy; instead, she was one of those rare creatures who possess all the varying moods of the sex. I

"He knows all?" asked her highness, her chin tilted aggressively.

"Everything."

"What must you think of me?"

There was that in her highness' tone (one which dared me to express any opinion that was not totally complimentary.)

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