

CHAPTER THREE

The Princess Comes Across

SYNOPSIS

Princess Olga of Sweden, who in reality is a stranded American show girl posing as royalty to get a film contract, meets King Mandini, the Concertina King, on board the S. S. Avignon bound for America. King falls hard for the Princess but she has to keep up pretenses so has nothing to do with him. A group of international police officials en route to a New York crime convention also are on board. The captain summons them to his quarters when he is informed by a radiogram that Merko, a convicted runaway murderer and master of disguise, is on board.

CHAPTER III

"Ach, vhut stupidity! Unbelievable!" exclaimed Dr. Steindorf. "Where is the description? All they tell us a murderer's name—the first thing he will change."

"Probably Lorel can give us information," suggested Cragg. "I am sorry messieurs," answered the Frenchman apologetically. "But I was not connected with the case. With your permission I will radio my office in Paris for Merko's description and Bertillon measurements."

As he spoke the door opened noiselessly and a Japanese, his yellow face a blank mask, entered the cabin.

"Gentlemen," chuckled Steindorf. "This is Mr. Kawati of the Imperial Japanese Secret Service. He arrives, as usual, when everything is over."

"Merko?" inquired Kawati, bowing stiffly. "I have already heard. He is the man who evaded arrest for months, disguised as a woman. Another time he was an Armenian, selling rugs. It is known he was an actor, and he speaks seven languages."

"Nobody need worry," remarked Morevitch as he combed his beard. "The passengers need not worry because they do not know about Merko. He need not worry because we have no description of him. And if we receive

last word as he grinned slyly.

"Darcy, eh?" King was plainly disturbed. "What are you doing here?"

"As usual, going to New York on business. I heard you and your band in Paris. A great success these days, aren't you, my dear fellow?"

"So what?"

"When did you add the Mandini to your name, Joe?" Darcy's voice was silky. "You remember my little weakness, Joe. Anything that concerns a public character interests me." As he saw his enemy flinch he added, "Fact is, I'm rather short of funds. I've been going over the passenger list, looking for . . . friends. And would you believe it, Joe, I find there just three people in the entire ship's list who'll be glad to let me have a little assistance. You're one of them. You want to have a great reception in New York. It would be too bad, wouldn't it, if certain people were told you had a prison record in the United States . . . ? Now, let me see—how much shall we say?"

King took a step toward Darcy, clenching his fist. Then he noticed Benton lounging in the doorway and relaxed.

"Show the gentleman out," he remarked crisply.

Benton caught Darcy faintly under one arm, swung him around facing the deck and delivered a terrific kick in the appropriate place. The blackmailer fairly flew out of the cabin. Benton lounged outside and watched Darcy pick himself up. As he did so Inspector Lorel swung around a corner of the deck. Instantly the fat man forgot his recent rebuff and for several minutes engaged the Frenchman in animated conversation.

"What do I care?" demanded King when his friend reported what he had

seen.

"But that's one of the mob of cops on board that he's talking to," protested Benton. "The bartender pointed out five of them to me. It ain't healthy—not with your pal about to spill your record to that French flatfoot. Better let me throw Darcy to the sharks."

"Let him spill it," snapped Mandini. "That's all finished—and I've got a receipt. There's only one way to handle those shakedown boys: show them they'll never get anywhere trying to push you around. The only thing I'm bothered about is how to turn the Princess into a democrat."

"Maybe this will help," said Benton solemnly as he removed a dainty handbag from his pocket and tossed it on the table. "I pinched it from the Princess a while ago while she was talking to those five cops on the promenade deck."

"I ought to break your neck," exploded his friend.

"I was trying to do you a favor," Benton was hurt. "Look—the Swede gave you the brush. You needed a strong 'in' so I pinch her puke. Now you give it back to her. She's got to thank you, ain't she?"

"Yes—if I can dodge the cops, and if I can convince her I didn't steal it myself." Nevertheless he stuck the bag in his pocket and sauntered out in high good humor. He found the Princess still looking about the deck for her

property which he presented to her with a deep bow.

"My bag!" cried the girl. "You've found my bag. How can I thank you?"

"That's easy," King gulped, then plunged ahead bravely. "What's the chances of a princess having cocktails tonight with a fellow like me?"

"Ve don't even know your name!"

"Mandini?" She lifted her eyebrows. "Mindini?" She lifted her eyebrows. "So it was you who sent us those lovely flowers?"

"I'll be honest, Princess," he stammered. "I didn't send them . . . I pinched them. I . . . I mean took 'em."

"Ve knew you—pinched them," she smiled.

"Well, now that you know the truth I suppose there's no chance for those cocktails."

"On the contrary. I think it would be very pleasant."

"One thing more'd make the whole day perfect," cried Mandini. "If you'd only like my concertina . . ."

"Now, I'll be honest with you," The Princess looked around cautiously then whispered. "I do like it. In fact, I wish I could play one."

"It takes a lotta hard work," her new friend replied. "You've got to make your fingers talk." He laid the recovered handbag on the edge of a nearby goldfish affarium and started to demonstrate. In doing so he knocked the bag into the water.

King made a grab for it. So did a Japanese fighting fish in the tiny pool. The man managed to win the tussle but his fingers were bleeding when they emerged.

"So brave! You are not badly hurt?" cried Her Highness. She opened the bag and extracted a wet powder puff and a roll of soggy French banknotes at which she gazed ruefully.

"I'll just wring them out now . . . and starch and iron them later," said King. He suited the action to the word but in doing so tore the roll almost in half. "Ooops!" he said ruefully. "I almost doubled your money. 'I'll get you some more."

"It's all right—they're still good," she replied. Then, as she saw Lady Gertrude bearing down upon them with fire in her eye, she added: "You'd better go now!"

"We're not doing this for fun, my dear," said Lady Gertrude when she and her ward were alone. "You've got to eliminate that concertina squeezer. If you don't you'll let something slip. Then where'll we be?"

"Maybe you're right at that," sulked the Princess.

"Of course I am. Now be a sensible girl and cut him off—cold!"

"Okay, Gertie," sighed the girl. "I'll put him on ice . . . Poor fellow." She glanced at King's retreating back. "I hope he freezes well."

(To be continued.)

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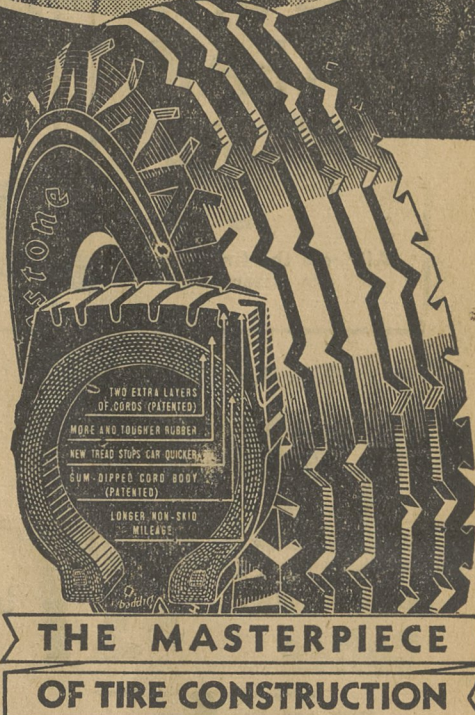
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