

THE MISSING PRINCE.

Adventure of an Amateur Detective. By MAJ. ARTHUR GRIFFITHS.

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The firm of Black & Brightsmith was good enough to express its great and grateful appreciation of my help in the case of the Eccecidia mine. It promised me other work of the same kind, plenty, if I cared to take it up, and soon sent to ask whether I could undertake a confidential mission to Algeria.

It was to convey a considerable sum of money in specie to the remote town of Biskra, a health resort of growing popularity, situated in the far-off desert, almost on the confines of the great Sahara.

"The money is to be paid over in exchange for a certain compromising document, one that closely affects the honor and character of a great family. Will you go?" said Harry Brightsmith.

I expressed my readiness, but asked why the sum could not be paid by check.

"The demand is for gold. In any case, we wish to secure the papers in full acquittance, and this can best—can only—be done by the hand of a thoroughly trustworthy agent, some one who will not be tempted to give and take at one and the same time."

"If necessary?" I inquired, catching at the word implied.

"We have no absolute certainty, Mac, but the demand is justified, that the case is bona fide, and not trumped up for the extortion of blackmail. This is another and still stronger reason for our appointment. If you can only find that there has been foul play anywhere, you will earn the eternal gratitude of his highness as well as a handsome doctoree. Wait. Let me tell you the whole story."

"You have heard of the Medea? They were once a reigning house, and may some day come to the throne again. Meanwhile, Prince Casimir de Medea lives in great retirement on the Thames, and his eldest son, Stanislas, who has come to man's estate, has been sent round the world to complete his education, with a Cook ticket, in eighty days."

"Prince Stanislas is said to be a lively youth, fond of horse racing, amusement, the fair sex—all that makes life enjoyable at 22. He has cost his highness a good deal of money at times, but his father has paid without murmur till now. The present demand—that on which we seek your co-operation, Mac—is for the liquidation of a gambling debt incurred upon the occasion of his alleged, disgraceful, and discreditable conduct. The young prince has been accused of a flagrant attempt to correct fortune."

"In plain English, what is that at cards?" "Nothing less. And on the surface the case seems perfectly clear. The charge of cheating is supported by his own confession, avowing up, in his own hand, and duly attested, the notarial, authenticated copy in our hands. Here it is. But first read the letter that accompanied it."

It was dated from the hotel des Zabihass-Biskra, and translated, ran as follows: "Your highness is in my inexhaustible painful task to bring to your highness the deliberately dishonest and disgraceful conduct of your son, Prince Stanislas de Medea. He has, I repeat, cheated at cards at Baccarat; caught in the act flagrantly. This deplorable affair occurred at the Cercle el Salahin, to which the prince was readily admitted on account of his rank and presumed gentlemanly character."

"Last night, when engaged in a friendly game, he took the bank with a capital of 2,000 francs, advanced by me, and won over by the gears of the club. Up to that point he had lost steadily, but now the luck turned. It became phenomenal. At every deal the prince won his bet, and he won. For quite an hour this lasted, but with a growing suspicion in the minds of several players that all was not well, they undertook to watch the prince. I myself was chosen to stand behind him, and at a given moment, a signal being made to seize and hold his hands."

"I did so, and immediately a pack of cards concealed somewhere within his paletot, fell to the ground. It was a pack made up chiefly of 'trees' and 'aces.' If your highness is acquainted with the game of baccarat the capital importance of these numbers will need no explanation."

"Play was stopped, and two of us were deputed to draw up a process-verbal describing the occurrence."

"Of course the prince's gains were declared null and void, and he was called upon to make restitution, also to pay his previous losses and the advance made by the bank. These amounts, which he had no means of paying, he had no funds. I discharged the debt, taking his acknowledgment."

"We also prepared for your son's signature a confession of his misconduct, a copy of which, duly certified by a notary, is now enclosed. The original will be surrendered to your son or to any person you may name on one condition: that you hand over in exchange a sum of 25,000 francs, to be applied for the relief of the poor Arabs in this oasis."

"We think that your highness will see the wisdom of meeting us fairly and promptly. It can hardly be your wish that a prince de Medea, the direct heir to your ancient name and fortune, should be high-topped and that some day return to your noble house, should be exposed as a cheat, branded as a blackguard, throughout the civilized world. It is only out of consideration for your highness that we spare him the ignominy he so richly merits."

"Conceiving that your highness would wish to avoid publicity, we consent to receive the money claimed in gold. If your highness' representative will meet ours in Algiers on the 23d of November at midday in the Jardin Marengo, near the Espérance."

"I am, your highness' obedient servant, Anatole Mirabell."

view of the situation. He has heard nothing from his son for some weeks—months, indeed, and except for the letters of credit that have turned up pretty regularly—at least, until six weeks ago—has had no idea of his whereabouts. We rather think he distrusts his son, or at least is so furiously angry at the scandal that he will not look at the case closely.

"What is he like, this young prince? Good sort? Bad lot? Which?" "Frankly, I am on his side, Black here. (Black was a tall, solemn chap, precariously and prematurely grave, with slow voice and drooping eyelids) has been rather against him."

"No, not quite that," protested Black; "but I have thought him too frivolous and fond of pleasure. Not sufficiently alive to the obligations of his position. I think with the cards. That, on the face of it, first. Then the fact that Prince Casimir has heard nothing direct from his son—no appeal, no apology, no explanation of any kind. This rather tells in the lad's favor, I think. If I am asked I should say, I don't pay—not, at least, till the story is verified."

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father not too liberal with his supplies? No, I could not bring myself to believe this quite. It was so much more likely that he had fallen prey to some of the cunning wiles of some means or other had recognized him in Biskra, penetrated his incognito, and turned their knowledge to serve their own nefarious ends."

This implied foul play of the worst kind. They might even have made away with him in this far-off semi-barbarous land; at least they could hold him sequestered somewhere, a close prisoner, until he had achieved their purpose—the extortion of hush money for a social offense that only existed in their own evil minds.

I saw now that it was my bounden duty to apply to the authorities. The police at Biskra were semi-military in character, and under the orders of a French colonel, a colonel of Spahis, Baron d'Hautrive by name, whose acquaintance I had already made.

He was a striking personage in his way; tall, of commanding presence, a soldier before everything, a military dandy in the best sense; always spick and span, in the whitest of shirt cuffs, the smartest and most perfectly fitting uniform; and also a man of the world. Contained now by the chances of a military service to this remote, but important post, he kept himself abreast of all that went on in Paris, indeed in Europe. For the English he expressed a warm and genuine liking, based on pleasant days spent and pleasant friendships made when military duties were less onerous.

Now I received me with great cordiality; but when he had heard my whole story, he shook his head with grave disapproval and said: "You should have taken me into your confidence sooner, my dear comrade. We are late; we have 'lost valuable time. If this young prince has—where is he? I know in Vienna and his mother, she was a Princess de Gauffremont—if Prince Stanislas has really been here, and if he has fallen among thieves in the way you suggest, I fear the thing has gone too far. He is probably beyond our help."

"Killed? Murdered?" I asked bluntly. He shrugged his shoulders. "It is a poor confession to make, but out here, in these wilds, such things have been done. Strange things, the strangest in, perhaps, this story. Frankly, monsieur, I hardly credit it. It falls at the very beginning. We do not even know that Prince Stanislas has ever been in Biskra. I question that, even."

"Would you have known?" "As a matter of course I think he would have come to me, I think he would have given me some information. In any case, the hotel registers—you know our French system—would certainly have told me. No prince de Medea has been recorded among the arrivals at Biskra, believe me; I should have heard."

"But if he were incognito, for reasons of his own?" "We will have the registers. Let us see if there is any mention of him on the lists. But you tell me you have yourself inquired at the hotels. I fear this will lead us no further."

"The lists were brought, but, as the Baron prophesied, they told us nothing. 'No,' he said, 'I see only one spot of firm ground anywhere, a point from which possibly we may travel in the right direction.'"

"The country is a desert, monsieur. Exactly, M. La Ramie is a real, tangible fact—the only notary public in Biskra. I know him personally a little, by reputation, and he is an honorable, straightforward, trustworthy, and would hardly lead himself to anything underhand. French notaries, as a rule, bear a deservedly high character. We had better see M. La Ramie. He can, at least, tell you the truth about the confession. A record of the copy, made and attested, will be kept in his office, if it ever was made, which I think is possible."

"We walked down without delay to the Place de la Sahara, and were shown in at once. All doors opened before the command, and the notary, a stout, middle-aged man, M. La Ramie, an aged man, who was in slippers and wore a black skull cap, was most courteous and obliging, prepared to give us any information we desired. But he knew nothing of a confession made by Prince Stanislas de Medea. Nothing of the sort had been brought to his notice; he had never heard of De Fivas' misdeed."

"Then I laid the copy before him, asking if that was not his office seal, his signature?" "The seal, yes. The signature, no. The first has been stolen. I know by whom; the second forged—undoubtedly forged, by the same cunning, vulgar, eccentric, scoundrel, 'faux' as they call him in the country. He was with rage as he rolled up the document, then paled suddenly with another emotion, alarm and misgiving. 'For will ruin me yet, disgrace me, and ruin my name, if my misdeed were known, my misdeed will cease.'"

"Was he one of your clerks?" asked the colonel. "My first clerk, Piquet, whom I drove out of my study some two months ago, for a flagrant misdeed. Liar, rascal, thief, gambler, Greek, he wasted his substance and his name in every low hole and another said he had gone on to Toungourt, and meant to go over to the—"

"I do not believe myself that he has left Biskra—neither he nor his wife, the legitimate companion, the croquet of the Cercle el Salahin."

"Della Croce?" I quickly asked Baron d'Hautrive, and I also picked up my hat at the mention of the club. We had struck another clue.

"This Della Croce," my friend the colonel told me as we walked away from the notary's office, "is probably at the bottom of this business. It was once in a good position, had money, and, I believe, had a good deal of it. He is real name—but he lost it all at play. He was bankrupt in cash, and almost in season to act as croquetier at the casino. Just to keep him from starvation, I heard of him, I never saw him, for, as you will understand, he did not frequent the casino. He was a man with a history, a man who had been in good, in the best society, knew men and cities, but had sunk into a mere adventurer, a vagabond and a scoundrel, was giving them water. Suddenly I saw him look toward the back of the van, a pale, shrill whistle, and whisper: 'Gare! la patronne. El petit—et patita!'"

"Following the direction of his signal I saw two young people flying apart with a haste that showed they were doing wrong. It was the old, old story; love was not running smoothly, and the chief obstacle was, so I thought, this stalwart female in the man's red blouse and sabots was giving them water. Suddenly I saw him look toward the back of the van, a pale, shrill whistle, and whisper: 'Gare! la patronne. El petit—et patita!'"

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