

THE PRINCESS MARITZA

By PERCY BREDNER.

CHAPTER VI.

FRINA MAVRODIN'S QUEST.

For some time Monsieur De Frolette remained silent. The return of the Princess was a contingency he had not provided for.

"Where is she?" asked suddenly, "Francis, monsieur. I do not know," Francois answered. "She has powerful friends in Sturzberg, and they conceal her well. I saw her for one moment in Konigsplatz. She was alone, and entered a shop where, following her, she was gone. I called myself her servant, and inquired about her, making the sign that has so long been used by her partisans to secure an answer. It had no effect. I was told that I was mistaken, that no such lady as I had described had entered the shop. You understand, monsieur, the sign must have been changed?"

De Frolette understood only too well. At his very door were enemies, the more dangerous because they had been partially admitted into his plans. He had himself engaged in watching the movements of the Princess, and he got up and placed it beside him, contemplating it thoughtfully as she slipped his wine.

"If we succeed," there is no doubt of the distinction to be won. This Englishman may win it for me. In a revolution a King's life is as other men's, dependent on the hazard of a die. If I read her smile aright I shall have my reward. And if we fail?—I paused, considering the course of events in such a case—"who knows? My reward might come the easier. There would be few shelters open to her. Only in defeat through Princess Maritza's influence is there danger to me. Success or failure otherwise, what does it matter? The path to mountain peaks are ever rugged, but men reach the summits. Why should I fail? The road to power may be closed against me, but the road to love— And he gazed into the eyes of the portrait, finding an answer in that man of action was a dreamer too.

When he entered the palace that evening, De Frolette inquired whether Lord Clöverton had arrived, and being answered in the negative, remained at the head of the stairs, bowing a well-turned compliment to one lady, or meeting another's pleasantry with an answering jest. He was in excellent good humor.

Presently Lord Clöverton came sniffing up the steps, raising half a dozen times to greet acquaintances. He, too, was in excellent good humor, then he seldom allowed people to see him otherwise.

"How I hate the man!" De Frolette said to himself, going toward the ambassador as he reached the vestibule. "May I have a word with you, my lord?"

"A thousand, my dear Monsieur De Frolette. Ah, a private word is it?" he added as the Frenchman led him aside.

"My lord, you have my greatest esteem, as you are aware."

Lord Clöverton bowed, and then said, "As a loyal Frenchman, I would see France predominant in the affairs of this country, that is natural, is it not so?"

"Most natural indeed, and, Monsieur, I say frankly France is playing a very worthy part."

"Do doubt, my lord," De Frolette answered. "I am but a looker-on with certain business interests which politics might affect, and therefore I take some notice of politics. Perhaps I see more clearly than some, my lord—the looker-on often do, and I am convinced that British policy is at the present moment the safeguard of Wallaria."

"I rejoice to hear it, Monsieur."

"And if you will allow me, my lord, I will add that your presence in Sturzberg is the great security."

"You think that Lord Clöverton returned?" "You will be pleased to learn that I have received notification that I am likely to be removed from Sturzberg."

"That would indeed be a disaster," said De Frolette. "No, my lord, any small help any information you can give me, I shall be glad to receive for myself and my business interests will prompt me. We have all a vein of selfishness in us."

"I am honored by your confidence, and you will be welcome at the Embassy."

"I will give you the information now," said De Frolette. "And he lowered his voice as he leaned toward the ambassador. 'The Princess Maritza is in Australia at present, I believe.'"

"Exactly," said the Frenchman. "Making a tour of the English colonies. A delicate attention to an honored guest and unfortunate exile, designed to keep her out of the way while the present unsettling feeling in Wallaria lasts; is it not so?"

"Your political acumen is not at fault."

"No, my lord, but yours is. The lady at present in Australia, or wherever she may be, is not the Princess, but a substitute. It needs very powerful friends to carry through such a deception as that."

Lord Clöverton turned sharply toward him, and as Francois had done, De Frolette answered the unasked question.

"Yes, my lord, Princess Maritza is in Sturzberg."

"Hiding where?"

"That I do not know. You will doubtless take means to find out. Command me if I can help you in any way."

"I thank you for the information. If you are not mistaken, the wayward child has been very ill advised. I gather, monsieur, that your business affairs would suffer were such a thing as a rising in the Princess Maritza's favor to take place?"

"Have I not said that there is a catch with in all of us?"

Lord Clöverton smiled, and together they crossed the vestibule.

Their short colloquy had not been overheard, nor had their presence been particularly noticed there except by one person—the Countess Mavrodin. She had reached the head of the stairs as De Frolette had leaned confidentially forward toward the ambassador, and she had greeted a friend, keeping her standing at the top of the stairs while they talked. So had good reason to be curious regarding such a confidence between two such men, and she had stood to watch and talk to each. She did not move until they had crossed the vestibule, and when they separated she followed Lord Clöverton.

Desmond Elery met her and found her in a gracious mood.

"And this mission, Dumitru—was it in my interests that you?"

"The man made a fierce clicking sound with his tongue."

"Ah, no, no, no; and again a hundred times no. He is for the Queen a little, and for himself very much. Have you still a doubt, even now? A sudden death should be his reward."

"Patience, Dumitru!"

"The English Captain had another visitor to-day—the British minister."

"This English Captain is in great requisition, it would seem," she said.

"Aye, he is a man, I grant you—that strong, resolute and rides as though horse and rider were in one piece."

"And honest Dumitru. I have looked into his face and thought him so."

"Can one judge so easily?" asked the man.

"Besides, honest or not, he is for our country, and that is what counts. Our enemies must be swept aside, he said imperiously, as though not only the will, but the power to do so were here."

"Thus, Princess," and the man's dark eyes gleamed as he just showed the keen, the flash of a dagger which he carried in his cloak.

"Not without my command, Dumitru!" she said hastily.

"The man bowed low, disappointed perhaps that the same spirit was not in her as was in him."

"We may use this English Captain for our ends," she went on. "I have a way and you shall find me, Dumitru, when the time comes. That Lord Clöverton has visited him shows that some new pressure is to be brought to bear upon him. We shall see how he stands in this, whether firm or not, and may learn how to act ourselves."

"He is ready to act when the token is given him," said Dumitru. "He has a few desperate men who are pledged to him."

"You are sure of this?"

"Quite sure."

"Who will follow for love of him?" she asked.

"They are of the kind who follow more readily for money," answered the man.

The girl remained thoughtful for a few moments. Something in the man's information had set her thoughts running in a new channel, and while she mused Frina Mavrodin entered the room hurriedly.

"Dumitru bowed low before her. 'You are early,' said the Princess. Frina turned to Dumitru.

"Captain Elery has returned early to his lodging, too; it would be well to watch. I do not think it will happen to-night, but should any messenger seek him we must know at once."

"Do, Dumitru," said the Princess, and when he had gone she turned to her companion. "What has brought home so early?"

"You, Maritza. I wondered whether you had remained safely here, or whether you had again jeopardized your cause by going so openly into the streets. It is known that you are in Sturzberg."

"By whom?"

"That lynx-eyed servant of De Frolette's saw you, as you know. You thought he would believe himself mistaken, but I knew better. His master, I returned to-night in the arms of Monsieur De Frolette, and Lord Clöverton in confidential conversation. When two men who hate each other as they do, agree, it is time to prepare for the storm. You must remain an absolute prisoner here for a while."

"You will not have to wait long," Frina answered. "Within an hour, I warrant you, there will be spies out in every quarter of the city to try and find your hiding place. You are safe so long as you remain here. What an advantage it is to have such a reputation of being headstrong and headstrong."

"No doubt. De Frolette played a trump card in telling Lord Clöverton of your presence in Sturzberg. The task of finding you will occupy the minister's attention for a little while, and as De Frolette is ready to do anything to advance his ends, he will strike his blow. That is why I offered to drive Captain Elery to his lodging. If the token is to be given to-night he will not be there to receive it."

"It may be sent to him," said the Princess.

"That is why Dumitru watches by the western gate."

"The moment the token is given I must know," said Maritza. "I have a plan. I have had plenty of lonely hours in which to mature plans. I am longing to put them into action. We are too cautious. Frina Mavrodin, your watch of caution is going openly into the city has nearly ruined us, Maritza."

"I have many friends in the city."

"True, and many enemies; and it is the enemies who happen to be in power. Do not be impatiently to 'Over-caution may be as fatal as impatience,' Maritza answered. 'We should advance a step each day, each night; do you advance?'

"So fast that we shall have run quickly to keep abreast of affairs shortly. A few weeks ago you had your real hope of better—Sturzberg here. Yet you are here. Had you even a suspicion that Jules De Frolette had been working in his own interests for these two years past, and not in yours?"

"True, Frina, we have advanced. Heaven help De Frolette when I touch power. Who knows what injury he may not have done to my cause in these two years? And he has succeeded in drawing this English Captain into his schemes."

"Captain Elery does not like De Frolette," said Frina. "Tell me your plan, Maritza."

The Princess drew a flower carefully from the bowl and held it to her face, as though she were absorbed for a moment in its beauty and fragrance.

"Captain Elery left the Court with you, to-night," she said. "That was why I thought of De Frolette's thought."

Frina laughed, such a joy in her laugh the Princess looked at her in astonishment.

"Yes, he came willingly, most willingly, I think."

"I hope to win him to my cause."

"He is a man, I am a woman; I shall try."

"And then?"

"Then Maritza—ah, we run on too fast. Tell me your plan."

"It is strange," said the Princess slowly. "But in England, I told you once I met Captain Elery. I told him who I was, and promised him work for his sword should he ever come to Wallaria."

"You told him that? Why?"

"I am a woman, and he is a man," the Princess answered.

For a moment the two women looked into each other's eyes. Then Frina smiled down at her straightened, as if she had been struck, and she reached up to inhale the perfume of the flowers in the vase. The Princess did not tell her plan, and Frina Mavrodin forgot to question her.

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Baron Petrescu shrugged his shoulders rather contemptuously.

"The moth—floats to the candle, and usually gets burnt," he said.

"The more you talk about the more I am convinced," asked Lord Clöverton. "In that case the attraction brings no hurt, Baron."

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CHAPTER VII.

THE TIME ARRIVES.

Within a short time of Lord Clöverton's return to the Embassy, spies and secret-service agents were abroad in the city endeavoring to discover the whereabouts of Princess Maritza. The ambassador at once telegraphed to the foreign office in London and received the answer that the report of her return to Wallaria was absurd, that she was certainly on her way to Australia. This confident answer, however, did not satisfy Lord Clöverton, in spite of the fact that no news of the Princess was forthcoming.

The Baron Petrescu, who had returned to Sturzberg without his knowledge, more, without the knowledge of any of those who were so eager to keep her out of the country, seemed impossible; but then in diplomacy it was not all the impossible things which happen. It was a fact that he had undertaken the undoubted ability of De Frolette. There were few men who probed more accurately the likely trend of future events, or who were quicker to recognize opportunities and seize them than the Frenchman. Lord Clöverton was far too clever a man to tell such an unlikely story merely to serve his own ends. He would know that the very improbability of the tale would have the effect of drawing attention to himself and his actions. No, whether the report were true or false, it was a matter of life and death, and he was not to be taken in. He was not to be taken in.

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"Well, Baron, my white hair gives me credit for greater age than does the feeling of youth which is still in me. I am young enough, even now, to recognize love, and to take an interest in it—in others, of course."

Baron Petrescu shrugged his shoulders rather contemptuously.

"The moth—floats to the candle, and usually gets burnt," he said.

"The more you talk about the more I am convinced," asked Lord Clöverton. "In that case the attraction brings no hurt, Baron."

"Time will show which is the best simile," was the answer. "He interests me," said Captain Elery.

"He interests you?"

"I am a woman, and he is a man," the Princess answered.

For a moment the two women looked into each other's eyes. Then Frina smiled down at her straightened, as if she had been struck, and she reached up to inhale the perfume of the flowers in the vase. The Princess did not tell her plan, and Frina Mavrodin forgot to question her.

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